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CALLING WORLD-4 OF KITHGOL!

novelet of Lost Races by H. B. FYFE

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 4 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • JANUARY, 1952

▶ *Novel of Strange Worlds*

SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS Poul Anderson 4

Far out in limitless space she plied her deadly trade . . . a Lorelei of the void, beckoning spacemen to death and destruction with her beautiful siren lure.

▶ *Novelet of Lost Races*

CALLING WORLD-4 OF KITHGOL H. B. Fyfe 80

Accidentally, the primitive Yorgh sent whirling off into space a grim, 200-year-old message . . . and lived to see his dead world meet the vibrant future.

▶ *Short Stories from All the Galaxies*

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A FINE DAY FOR DYING John Martin 38

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Slowly, inexorably, the struggling Earthman was metamorphosed into a Siamese twin—a twin whose partner was jellied death.

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Now there was time . . . plenty of time on this strange, dark planet . . . for those erudite exiles from frozen Earth to ponder the value of man's accumulated knowledge.


THE VIZIGRAPH Get into the bout of ballots, blasts and battles. 2 & 102

T. I. SCOTT, President



MALCOLM REISS, General Manager

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Due to an overwhelming heap of fen-mail we have considerably lengthened the letter department in this issue. We welcome your opinions, and seek your suggestions. Many of the latter have been first-rate and have been put into practice. Keep 'em coming. In a photo-finish the camera split the pic winners thus: (1) Arthur Stone; (2) Henry Burwell, Jr.; (3) Dick Ryan.

ART FOR ART'S SAKE!

816 Soledad Avenue,
Santa Barbara, California.

Dear ZL199036-BIX-BY3:

Nice to have a Chinese robot—*zump—zump*—for an editor, but you got a little out of character on page 106, eh?

Ha, ha, Ha! Well, Bob Barnett and Dennis Strong and all the other "old-timers" can get together all they want; anyone who says he has been reading *Stf* since 1935 and then blandly states that he doesn't know what the Syrtis Major is, had better take a back seat to the less crude "teen-agers," who nevertheless probably know more about Mars than Mr. Barnett ever will. He sounds phony to me; may you perish in Elysium, Bob, and that is NOT the dero name for Jupiter!

The September *PLANET* seems to have no exceptional stories, but rather a lack of bad ones. I observe that there are no particularly original plots, but on the other hand, no poor ones, and *no back ones*. Further, *PLANET*'s authors and editors are maintaining a literary standard which, despite format, entirely supersedes that of her competitors.

In short, with her slight change in policy (not so much blood-and-thunder), *PLANET* has become literally a sanctuary (O ULLA!) of all that is hallowed and traditional in *Stf*, and as such will undoubtedly be the birthplace of a great many more outstanding stories and authors than she has already.

I cannot understand the violent reaction against reprints in *PLANET*. The general objection seems to be that *PLANET* has not printed enough good stories to allow for reprints; strange objection to come from READERS! For my part you can reprint *CREATURES THAT TIME FORGOT*, *PILLAR OF FIRE*, *ZERO HOUR*, et al. over and over again! And you might toss in a little short now and again, like *ME, MYSELF, AND I* . . . just for fun.

Last place in this issues goes to J. W. Groves' *HOSPITALITY*, for being stupid enough to postulate that the only reason we sleep is because it gets dark every twelve hours or so. This is actually a

serious blunder, and one which renders his whole story ridiculous. Where was the Ed. when this one got past?

And first place to Poul Anderson for the clever manner in which the Earthman finally won out; little flashes of insight like these make a good story, and also garnish PLANET. All the other stories are tied, with perhaps THE INHABITED MEN rated slightly lower.

As to the letters, I should like to put forth words in answer to Mary Wallace Corby. In the first place, there are those left who believe in "art for art's sake," and I am one of them. And this is because I recognize that our views regarding art have been side-tracked by our wrong (mostly Christian) idea of the FUNCTION of art, and the artist. The artist is not, as commonly believed, trying to SAY anything, or COMMUNICATE anything; our democratic inheritance leads us to believe this, to think of the artist as a servant, a conduit, attempting to pass on great and Godly concepts for the good of others.

In reality, art is not in any sense an "expression," or "outlet." It is instead *solidification* or *inflow*; it is *reiteration*. The function of art lies in its value to the individual creator alone, and hence the phrase "art for art's sake" is valid; and any work which is not created in this spirit is demonstrably not art.

Now, about Bradbury: You have committed the fundamental mistake of the Nihilist, Miss Corby. You state that Bradbury's "death-motif" is a symbol of his belief in the basic rottenness of mankind. You also say that, in your opinion, Bradbury's constant dwelling on the subject of "death" (the period that ends the sentence) is BAD. Consequently, you more than imply that you yourself believe Death a basis for the belief in the rottenness of mankind, and that Death is, also, BAD. Yet, consciously, you attempt to defend the very opposite point of view! Actually, it should not be considered morbid to concentrate on death.

If you would like to confer further on this, Miss Corby simply write me. If you don't, Miss Hartman will do!—(cackle!).

... zump ... zump ... me allee vellee pleased
wishee ishee PLANET STOREE! More likee him,
please!

S. VERNON McDANIEL

HOLD THAT PARENTHESIS!

113-15th Street,
Wheeling, West Va.

Dear Editor:

I just got through polishing off the Vizigraph and then I immediately ran to my back issues and found the letter that kicked up the fuss. I know that I'm late in getting in on the battle, but I'd like to say a few things anyway. Being just another sniffling pimply-faced adolescent, it probably isn't worth anything but here it is anyway. To Mr. Strong:

Why don't you go fall in a hole and then pull it in after you. If you're going to knock the fen, why not lay off the stuff about Isaac Asimov? Or are you trying to push over an object lesson. If you know what an object lesson is. I find PS right entertaining and I quite often get a laugh from the "sly parenthetical inserts and the inane play on words." I don't doubt that there are a good many fen who will agree on this point. I don't quite have the imagination to beat up these concoctions that give me an occasional giggle and I rather admire anyone who can. (Now, now, egotists!! Let's not go off and

get swelled heads.) In case you didn't recognize it, that was a sly parenthetical insert. I think.

I will now proceed to give you a mere listing of stories and my ignorant reactions. Let's start from the front and work back. Such an original method.

THE INCUBI OF PARALLEL X. Lemme say something about that illustration first. I think that PS gets very good artists and that they turn out good work but why is it that the women can get along without air helmets or space suits when the men can't seem to get along without them? Please to answer me that. To the story. 'Twas right good. I haven't been reading Stf very long but it seems to me that the plot was given a slightly different twist with the oversized women. Cute.

SANCTUARY, OH ULLA! It was a fair story, but I didn't like it. Strong won't like this either. I don't, can't seem to find any reason. I either like a story or I don't like it. I can appreciate a story that is well written but I still might not like it. Complicated.

THE INHABITED MEN. Oh, come now. I can get along very well without such stories.

THE STAR FOOL. I like!! (Maybe if I keep bouncing along and just say whether or not I like them with no reason, I can get Ol' Denny to call me names, too.)

LAST NIGHT OUT. Another one that I can take or leave. I'd rather leave it.

TYDORE'S GIFT. Clever ending. Again something a little different. I think. Like I have said, I'm new to the game.

THE WATCHERS. I rather think that this deal about spies from another world is getting worn out. Don't care for it. I am probably tramping all over toes by bouncing peoples' favorite authors. Small matter. An author might turn out a good story every once in a while but that is no reason for applauding everything he/she does, no matter how foul.

VENGEANCE ON MARS. Ain't this idea a little worn in spots? Hmmmm?

HOSPITALITY. Fair.

LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS. It was a good story for action, etc.; but I just don't like the idea of guys running around with two personalities where there should be one. Kinda like INHABITED MEN. The way I feel I mean. (Huh?)

Well, give a pic to Mr. R. D. McNamara on accounta because I feel the same way he does, and two to Jeanne Morgan and three to the lady with the triple-track mind. I think that she got gypped a couple of tracks. 1) grandchild, 2) grandchild, 3) grandchild, 4) radio, 5) TV, 6) letter to La Viz. How's that?

Adolescently yours,

J. B. VAIL, JR.

BLISH, HOLD THAT STOMACH!

2395 Gladys Street,
Beaumont, Texas.

Dear Editor:

Time for a little literary critique on the July PLANET. Poul Anderson's VIRGIN OF VAL-KARION reminded me of the old Conan stories with its Cimmerian atmosphere and sword-crashing suspense. It took first place with me for this issue, but by a narrow margin.

Morrison's MONSTER was not only well-written, and delightfully put together, but even intrigued my wife, with its reference to the hardships of colonial

(Continued on page 102)





A trumpet blew its high note into the dusking heavens, and Valduma appeared above the battlers to give heart to the men of Drogobych.

Sargasso of Lost Starships

By POUL ANDERSON

Far out in limitless space, Valduma, queen of the voluptuous half-life, plied her deadly trade . . . a Lorelei of the black void, beckoning adventurous spacemen to death and destruction with her beautiful siren lure.

BASIL DONOVAN was drunk again. He sat near the open door of the Golden Planet, boots on the table, chair tilted back, one arm resting on the

broad shoulder of Wocha, who sprawled on the floor beside him, the other hand clutching a tankard of ale. The tunic was open above his stained gray shirt, the bat-

tered cap was askew on his close-cropped blond hair, and his insignia—the stars of a captain and the silver leaves of an earl on Ansa—were tarnished. There was a deepening flush over his pale gaunt cheeks, and his eyes smoldered with an old rage.

Looking out across the cobbled street, he could see one of the tall, half-timbered houses of Lanstead. It had somehow survived the space bombardment, though its neighbors were rubble, but the tile roof was clumsily patched and there was oiled paper across the broken plastic of the windows. An anachronism, looming over the great bulldozer which was clearing the wreckage next door. The workmen there were mostly Ansans, big men in ragged clothes, but a well-dressed Terran was bossing the job. Donovan cursed wearily and lifted his tankard again.

The long, smoky-raftered taproom was full—stolid burgers and peasants of Lanstead, discharged spacemen still in their worn uniforms, a couple of tailed greenies from the neighbor planet Shalmu. Talk was low and spiritless, and the smoke which drifted from pipes and cigarettes was bitter, cheap tobacco and dried bark. The smell of defeat was thick in the tavern.

"May I sit here, sir? The other places are full."

Donovan glanced up. It was a young fellow, peasant written over his sunburned face in spite of the gray uniform and the empty sleeve. Olman—yes, Sam Olman, whose family had been under Donovan fief these two hundred years. "Sure, make yourself at home."

"Thank you, sir. I came in to get some supplies, thought I'd have a beer too. But you can't get anything these days. Not to be had."

Sam's face looked vaguely hopeful as he eyed the noble. "We do need a gas engine bad, sir, for the tractor. Now that the central powercaster is gone, we got to have our own engines. I don't want to presume, sir, but—"

Donovan lifted one corner of his mouth in a tired smile. "I'm sorry," he said. "If I could get one machine for the whole community I'd be satisfied. Can't be done. We're trying to start a small factory of our own up at the manor, but it's slow work."

"I'm sure if anyone can do anything it's you, sir."

Donovan looked quizzically at the open countenance across the table. "Sam," he asked, "why do you people keep turning to the Family? We led you, and it was to defeat. Why do you want anything more to do with nobles? We're not even that, any longer. We've been stripped of our titles. We're just plain citizens of the Empire now like you, and the new rulers are Terran. Why do you still think of us as your leaders?"

"But you are, sir! You've always been. It wasn't the king's fault, or his men's, that Terra had so much more'n we did. We gave 'em a fight they won't forget in a hurry!"

"You were in my squadron, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir. CPO on the *Ansa Lancer*. I was with you at the Battle of Luga." The deep-set eyes glowed. "We hit 'em there, didn't we, sir?"

"So we did." Donovan couldn't suppress the sudden fierce memory. Outnumbered, outgunned, half its ships shot to pieces and half the crews down with Sirius fever, the Royal Lansteaders had still made naval history and sent the Imperial Fleet kiyooodling back to Sol. Naval historians would be scratching their heads over that battle for the next five centuries. Before God, they'd fought!

HE BEGAN to sing the old war-song, softly at first, louder as Sam joined him—

*Comrades, hear the battle tiding,
hear the ships that rise and yell
faring outward, starward riding—
Kick the Terrans back to hell!*

The others were listening, men raised weary heads, an old light burned in their eyes and tankards clashed together. They stood up to roar out the chorus till the walls shook.

*Lift your glasses high,
kiss the girls good-bye,
(Live well, my friend, live well, live
you well)*

*for we're riding,
for we're riding,
for we're riding out to Terran sky! Terran
sky! Terran sky!*

*We have shaken loose our thunder
where the planets have their way,
and the starry deeps of wonder
saw the Impies in dismay.*

*Lift your glasses high,
kiss the girls good-bye—*

The workmen in the street heard it and stopped where they were. Some began to sing. The Imperial superintendent yelled, and an Ansan turned to flash him a wolfish grin. A squad of blue-uniformed Solarian marines coming toward the inn went on the double.

*Oh, the Emp'r'or sent his battle
ships against us in a mass,
but we shook them like a rattle
and we crammed them—*

"Hi, there! Stop that!"

The song died, slowly and stubbornly, the men stood where they were and hands clenched into hard-knuckled fists. Someone shouted an obscenity.

The Terran sergeant was very young, and he felt unsure before those steady, hating eyes. He lifted his voice all the louder: "That will be enough of that. Any more and I'll run you all in for *lèse majesté*. Haven't you drunken bums anything better to do than sit around swilling beer?"

A big Ansan smith laughed with calculated raucousness.

The sergeant looked around, trying to ignore him. "I'm here for Captain Donovan—Earl Basil, if you prefer. They said he'd be here. I've got an Imperial summons for him."

The noble stretched out a hand. "This is he. Let's have that paper."

"It's just the formal order," said the sergeant. "You're to come at once."

"Commoners," said Donovan mildly, "address me as 'sir.'"

"You're a commoner with the rest of 'em now." The sergeant's voice wavered just a little.

"I really must demand a little respect,"

said Donovan with drunken precision. There was an unholy gleam in his eyes. "It's a mere formality, I know, but after all my family can trace itself farther back than the Empire, whereas you couldn't name your father."

Sam Olman snickered.

"Well, sir—" The sergeant tried elaborate sarcasm. "If you, sir, will please be so good as to pick your high-bred tail off that chair, sir, I'm sure the Imperium would be mostly deeply grateful to you, sir."

"I'll have to do without its gratitude, I'm afraid." Donovan folded the summons without looking at it and put it in his tunic pocket. "But thanks for the paper. I'll keep it in my bathroom."

"You're under arrest!"

Donovan stood slowly up, unfolding his sheer two meters of slender, wiry height. "All right, Wocha," he said. "Let's show them that Ansa hasn't surrendered yet."

He threw the tankard into the sergeant's face, followed it with the table against the two marines beside him, and vaulted over the sudden ruckus to drive a fist into the jaw of the man beyond.

Wocha rose and his booming cry trembled in the walls. He'd been a slave of Donovan's since he was a cub and the man a child, and if someone had liberated him he wouldn't have known what to do. As batman and irregular groundtrooper he'd followed his master to the wars, and the prospect of new skull-breaking lit his eyes with glee.

For an instant there was tableau, Terrans and Ansans rigid, staring at the monster which suddenly stood behind the earl. The natives of Donarr have the not uncommon centauroid form, but their bodies are more like that of a rhinoceros than of a horse, hairless and slaty blue and enormously massive. The gorilla-armed torso ended in a round, muzzled, ape-like face, long-eared, heavy-jawed, with canine tusks hanging over the great gash of a mouth. A chair splintered under his feet, and he grinned.

"Paraguns—" cried the sergeant.

All hell let out for noon. Some of the customers huddled back into the corners, but the rest smashed the ends off bottles and threw themselves against the Terrans. Sam Olman's remaining arm yanked a ma-

rine to him and bashed his face against the wall. Donovan's fist traveled a jolting arc to the nearest belly and he snatched a rifle loose and crunched it against the man's jaw. A marine seized him from behind, he twisted in the grip and kicked savagely, whirled around and drove the rifle butt into the larynx.

"Kill the bluebellies! Kill the Impies! Hail, Ansa!"

Wocha charged into the squad, grabbed a hapless Terran in his four-fingered hands, and swung the man like a club. Someone drew his bayonet to stab the slave, it glanced off the thick skin and Wocha roared and sent him reeling. The riot blazed around the room, trampling men underfoot, shouting and cursing and swinging.

"Donovan, Donovan!" shouted Sam Olman. He charged the nearest Impy and got a bayonet in the stomach. He fell down, holding his hand to his wound, screaming.

The door was suddenly full of Terrans, marines arriving to help their comrades. Paraguns began to sizzle, men fell stunned before the supersonic beams and the fight broke up. Wocha charged the rescuers and a barrage sent his giant form crashing to the floor.

They herded the Ansans toward the city jail. Donovan, stirring on the ground as consciousness returned, felt handcuffs snap on his wrists.

IMPERIAL summons being what they were, he was bundled into a groundcar and taken under heavy guard toward the ordered place. He leaned wearily back, watching the streets blur past. Once a group of children threw stones at the vehicle.

"How about a cigarette?" he said.

"Shut up."

To his mild surprise, they did not halt at the military government headquarters—the old Hall of Justice where the Donovans had presided before the war—but went on toward the suburbs. The spaceport being still radioactive. They must be going to the emergency field outside the city. Hm. He tried to relax. His head ached from the stun-beam.

A light cruiser had come in a couple of days before, H. M. *Ganymede*. It loomed enormous over the green rolling fields and

the distance-blued hills and forests, a lance of bright metal and energy pointed into the clear sky of Ansa, blinding in the sun. A couple of spacemen on sentry at the gangway halted as the car stopped before them.

"This man is going to Commander Jansky."

"Aye, aye. Proceed."

Through the massive airlock, down the mirror-polished companionway, into an elevator and up toward the bridge—Donovan looked about him with a professional eye. The Impies kept a clean, tight ship, he had to admit.

He wondered if he would be shot or merely imprisoned. He doubted if he'd committed an enslaving offense. Well, it had been fun, and there hadn't been a hell of a lot to live for anyway. Maybe his friends could spring him, if and when they got some kind of underground organized.

He was ushered into the captain's cabin. The ensign with him saluted. "Donovan as per orders, ma'm."

"Very good. But why is he in irons?"

"Resisted orders, ma'm. Started a riot. Bloody business."

"I—see." She nodded her dark head. "Losses?"

"I don't know, ma'm, but we had several wounded at least. A couple of Ansans were killed, I think."

"Well, leave him here. You may go."

"But—ma'm, he's dangerous!"

"I have a gun, and there's a man just outside the door. You may go, ensign."

Donovan swayed a little on his feet, trying to pull himself erect, wishing he weren't so dirty and bloody and generally messed up. You look like a tramp, man, he thought. Keep up appearances. Don't let them outdo us, even in spit and polish.

"Sit down, Captain Donovan," said the woman.

He lowered himself to a chair, raking her with deliberately insolent eyes. She was young to be wearing a commander's twin planets—young and trim and nice looking. Tall body, sturdy but graceful, well filled out in the blue uniform and red cloak; raven-black hair falling to her shoulders; strong blunt-fingered hands, one of them resting close to her sidearm. Her face was interesting, broad and cleanly molded, high

cheekbones, wide full mouth, stubborn chin, snub nose, storm-gray eyes set far apart under heavy dark brows. A superior peasant type, he decided, and felt more at ease in the armor of his inbred haughtiness. He leaned back and crossed his legs.

"I am Helena Jansky, in command of this vessel," she said. Her voice was low and resonant, the note of strength in it. "I need you for a certain purpose. Why did you resist the Imperial summons?"

Donovan shrugged. "Let's say that I'm used to giving orders, not receiving them."

"Ah—yes." She ruffled the papers on her desk. "You were the Earl of Lanstead, weren't you?"

"After my father and older brother were killed in the war, yes." He lifted his head. "I am still the Earl."

She studied him with a dispassionate gaze that he found strangely uncomfortable. "I must say that you are a curious sort of leader," she murmured. "One who spends his time in a tavern getting drunk, and who on a whim provokes a disorder in which many of his innocent followers are hurt or killed, in which property difficult to replace is smashed—yes, I think it was about time that Ansa had a change of leadership."

Donovan's face was hot. Hell take it, what right had she to tell him what to do? What right had the whole damned Empire to come barging in where it wasn't wanted? "The Families, under the king, have governed Ansa since it was colonized," he said stiffly. "If it had been such a misrule as you seem to think, would the commons have fought for us as they did?"

II

A GAIN that thoughtful stare. She saw a tall young man, badly disarrayed, blood and dirt streaking his long, thin-carved, curve-nosed features, an old scar jagging across his high narrow forehead. The hair was yellow, the eyes were blue, the whole look that of an old and settled aristocracy. His bitter voice lashed at her: "We ruled Ansa well because we were part of it, we grew up with the planet and we understood our folk and men were free under us. That's something which no upstart Solar Empire can have, not for centuries, not ever

to judge by the stock they use for nobility. When peasants command spaceships—"

Her face grew a little pale, but she smiled and replied evenly, "I am the Lady Jansky of Torgandale on Valor—Sirius A IV—and you are now a commoner. Please remember that."

"All the papers in the Galaxy won't change the fact that your grandfather was a dirt farmer on Valor."

"He was an atomjack, and I'm proud of it. I suggest further that an aristocrat who has nothing to trade on but his pedigree is very ragged indeed. Now, enough of that." Her crisp tones snapped forth. "You've committed a serious offense, especially since this is still occupied territory. If you wish to cooperate with me, I can arrange for a pardon—also for your brawling friends. If not, the whole bunch of you can go to the mines."

Donovan shook his head, trying to clear it of alcohol and weariness and the ringing left by the parabeam. "Go on," he said, a little thickly. "I'll listen, anyway."

"What do you know of the Black Nebula?"

She must have seen his muscles jerk. For an instant he sat fighting himself, grasping at rigidity with all the strength that was in him, and the memory was a blaze and a shout and a stab of pure fear.

Valduma, Valduma!

The sudden thudding of his heart was loud in his ears, and he could feel the fine beads of sweat starting forth on his skin. He made a wrenching effort and pulled his mouth into a lopsided grin, but his voice wavered: "Which black nebula? There are a lot of them."

"Don't try to bait me." Her eyes were narrowed on him, and the fingers of one hand drummed the desktop. "You know I mean *the* Black Nebula. Nobody in this Galactic sector speaks of any other."

"Why—well—" Donovan lowered his face to hide it till he could stiffen the mask, rubbing his temples with manacled hands. "It's just a nebula. A roughly spherical dustcloud, maybe a light-year in diameter, about ten parsecs from Ansa toward Sagittari. A few colonized stars on its fringes, nothing inside it as far as anyone knows. It has a bad name for some reason. The

superstitious say it's haunted, and you hear stories of ships disappearing—Well, it gets a pretty wide berth. Not much out there anyway."

His mind was racing, he thought he could almost hear it click and whirr as it spewed forth idea after idea, memory after memory. *Valduma and the blackness and they who laughed. The Nebula is pure poison, and now the Empire is getting interested. By God, it might poison them! Only would it stop there? This time they might decide to go on, to come out of the blackness.*

Jansky's voice seemed to come from very far away: "You know more than that, Donovan. Intelligence has been sifting Ansan records. You were the farthest-ranging space raider your planet had, and you had a base on Heim, at the very edge of the Nebula. Among your reports, there is an account of your men's unease, of the disappearance of small ships which cut through the Nebula on their missions, of ghostly things seen aboard other vessels and men who went mad. Your last report on the subject says that you investigated personally, that most of your crew went more or less crazy while in the Nebula, and that you barely got free. You recommend the abandonment of Heim and the suspension of operations in that territory. This was done, the region being of no great strategic importance anyway."

"Very well." The voice held a whipcrack undertone. "What do you know about the Black Nebula?"

Donovan had fought his way back to impassivity. "You have about the whole story already," he said. "There were all sorts of illusions as we penetrated, whisperings and glimpses of impossible things and so on. It didn't affect me much, but it drove many toward insanity and some died. There was also very real and unexplainable trouble—engines, lights, and so on. My guess is that there's some sort of radiation in the Nebula which makes atoms and electrons misbehave; that'd affect the human nervous system too, of course. If you're thinking of entering it yourself, my only advice is—don't."

"Hm." She cupped her chin in one hand and looked down at the papers. "Frankly,

we know very little about this Galactic sector. Very few Terrans were ever here before the war, and previous intercourse on your part with Sol was even slighter. However, Intelligence has learned that the natives of almost every inhabited planet on the fringes of the Nebula worship it or at least regard it as the home of the gods."

"Well, it is a conspicuous object in their skies," said Donovan. He added truthfully enough: "I only know about Heim, where the native religion in the area of our base was a sort of devil-worship centered around the Nebula. They made big sacrifices—food-stuffs, furs, tools, every conceivable item of use or luxury—which they claimed the devil-gods came and took. Some of the colonists thought there was something behind the legends, but I have my doubts." He shrugged. "Will that do?"

"For the time being." Jansky smiled with a certain bleak humor. "You can write a detailed report later on, and I strongly advise you not to mislead me. Because you're going there with us."

Donovan accepted the news coldly, but he thought the knocking of his heart must shake his whole body. His hands felt chilly and wet. "As you wish. Though what I can do—"

"You've been there before and know what to expect. Furthermore, you know the astrologation of that region; our charts are worse than sketchy, and even the Ansan tables have too many blank spots."

"Well—" Donovan got the words out slowly. "If I don't have to enlist. I will not take an oath to your Emperor."

"You needn't. Your status will be that of a civilian under Imperial command, directly responsible to me. You will have a cabin of your own, but no compensation except the abandonment of criminal proceedings against you." Jansky relaxed and her voice grew gentler. "However, if you serve well I'll see what I can do about pay. I daresay you could use some extra money."

"Thank you," said Donovan formally. He entered the first phase of the inchoate plan which was taking cloudy shape in his hammering brain: "May I have my personal slave with me? He's nonhuman, but he can eat Terran food."

Jansky smiled. There was sudden warmth

in that smile, it made her human and beautiful. "As you wish if he doesn't have fleas. I'll write you an order for his embarkation."

She'd hit the ceiling when she found what kind of passenger she'd agreed to, thought Donovan. But by then it would be too late. *And, with Wocha to help me, and the ship blundering blind into the Nebula—Valduma, Valduma, I'm coming back! And this time will you kiss me or kill me?*

THE *Ganymede* lifted grays and put the Ansa sun behind her. Much farther behind was Sol, an insignificant mote fifty light-years away, lost in the thronging glory of stars. Ahead lay Sagittari, Galactic center and the Black Nebula.

Space burned and blazed with a million bitter-bright suns, keen cold unwinking flames strewn across the utter dark of space, flashing and flashing over the hollow gulf of the leagues and the years. The Milky Way foamed in curdled silver around that enormous night, a shining girdle jeweled with the constellations. Far and far away wheeled the mysterious green and blue-white of the other galaxies, sparks of a guttering fire with a reeling immensity between. Looking toward the bows, one saw the great star-clusters of Sagittari, the thronging host of suns burning and thundering at the heart of the Galaxy. *And what have we done?* thought Basil Donovan. *What is man and all his proud achievements? Our home star is a dwarf on the lonely fringe of the Galaxy, out where the stars thin away toward the great emptiness. We've ranged maybe two hundred light-years from it in all directions and it's thirty thousand to the Center! Night and mystery and nameless immensities around us, our day of glory the briefest flicker on the edge of nowhere, then oblivion forever—and we won't be forgotten, because we'll never have been noticed. The Black Nebula is only the least and outermost of the great clouds which thicken toward the Center and hide its ultimate heart from us, it is nothing even as we, and yet it holds a power older than the human race and a terror that may overwhelm it.*

He felt again the old quailing funk, fear crawled along his spine and will drained out of his soul. He wanted to run, escape, huddle under the sky of Ansa to hide from

the naked blaze of the universe, live out his day and forget that he had seen the scornful face of God. But there was no turning back, not now, the ship was already outpacing light on her secondary drive and he was half a prisoner aboard. He squared his shoulders and walked away from the viewplate, back toward his cabin.

Wocha was sprawled on a heap of blankets, covering the floor with his bulk. He was turning the brightly colored pages of a child's picture book. "Boss," he asked, "when do we kill 'em?"

"The Impies? Not yet, Wocha. Maybe not at all." Donovan stepped over the monster and lay down on his bunk, hands behind his head. He could feel the thrum of the driving engines, quivering in the ship and his bones. "The Nebula may do that for us."

"We go back there?" Wocha stirred uneasily. "I don't like, boss. It's toombar. Bad."

"Yeah, so it is."

"Better we stay home. Manor needs repair. Peasants need our help. I need beer."

"So do I. I'll see if we can't promote some from the quartermaster. Old John can look after the estate while we're away, and the peasants will just have to look after themselves. Maybe it's time they learned how." At a knock on the door: "Come in."

Tetsuo Takahashi, the ship's exec, brought his small sturdy form around Wocha and sat down on the edge of the bunk. "Your slave has the Old Lady hopping mad," he grinned. "He'll eat six times a man's ration."

"And drink it." Donovan smiled back; he couldn't help liking the cocky little Ter-ran. Then, with a sudden renewed bitterness: "And he's worth it. I couldn't be without him. He may not be so terribly bright, but he's my only proof that loyalty and decency aren't extinct."

Takahashi gave him a puzzled look. "Why do you hate us so much?" he asked.

"You came in where you weren't asked. Ansa was free, and now it's just another province of your damned Empire."

"Maybe so. But you were a backwater, an underpopulated agricultural planet which nobody had ever heard of, exposed to barbarian raids and perhaps to nonhuman

conquest. You're safe now, and you're part of a great social-economic system which can do more than all those squabbling little kingdoms and republics and theocracies and God knows what else put together could ever dream of."

"Who said we wanted to be safe? Our ancestors came to Ansa to be free. We fought Shalmu when the greenies wanted to take what we'd built, and then we made friends with them. We had elbow room and a way of life that was our own. Now you'll bring in your surplus population to fill our green lands with yelling cities and squalling people. You'll tear down the culture we evolved so painfully and make us just another bunch of kowtowing Imperial citizens."

"Frankly, Donovan, I don't think it was much of a culture. It sat in its comfortable rut and admired the achievements of its ancestors. What did your precious Families do but hunt and loaf and throw big parties? Maybe they did fulfill a magisterial function—so what? Any elected yut could do the same in that simple a society." Takahashi fixed his eyes on Donovan's. "But rights and wrongs aside, the Empire had to annex Ansa, and when you wouldn't come in peaceably you had to be dragged in."

"Yeah. A dumping ground for people who were too stupid not to control their own breeding."

"Your Ansan peasants, my friend, have about twice the Terran birth rate. It's merely that there are more Terrans to start with—and Sirians and Centaurians and all the old settled planets. No, it was more than that. It was a question of military necessity."

"Uh-huh. Sure."

"Read your history sometime. When the Commonwealth broke up in civil wars two hundred years ago it was hell between the stars. Half savage peoples who never should have left their planets had learned how to build spaceships and were going out to raid and conquer. A dozen would-be overlords scorched whole worlds with their battles. You can't have anarchy on an interstellar scale. Too many people suffer. Old Manuel I had the guts to proclaim himself Emperor of Sol—no pretty euphemisms for him, an

empire was needed and an empire was what he built. He kicked the barbarians out of the Solar System and went on to conquer their home territories and civilize them. That meant he had to subjugate stars closer to home, to protect his lines of communication. This led to further trouble elsewhere. Oh, yes, a lot of it was greed, but the planets which were conquered for their wealth would have been sucked in anyway by sheer economics. The second Argolid carried on, and now his son, Manuel II, is finishing the job. We've very nearly attained what we must have—an empire large enough to be socio-economically self-sufficient and defend itself against all comers, of which there are many, without being too large for control. You should visit the inner Empire sometime, Donovan, and see how many social evils it's been possible to wipe out because of security and central power. But we need this sector to protect our Sagittarian flank, so we're taking it. Fifty years from now you'll be glad we did."

DONOVAN looked sourly up at him. "Why are you feeding me that?" he asked. "I've heard it before."

"We're going to survey a dangerous region, and you're our guide. The captain and I think there's more than a new radiation in the Black Nebula. I'd like to think we could trust you."

"Think so if you wish."

"We could use a hypnoprobe on you, you know. We'd squeeze your skull dry of everything it contained. But we'd rather spare you that indignity."

"And you might need me when you get there, and I'd still be only half conscious. Quit playing the great altruist, Takahashi."

The exec shook his head. "There's something wrong inside you, Donovan," he murmured. "You aren't the man who licked us at Luga."

"Lugal!" Donovan's eyes flashed. "Were you there?"

"Sure. Destroyer *North Africa*, just come back from the Zarune front—Cigarette?"

They fell to yarning and passed a pleasant hour. Donovan could not suppress a vague regret when Takahashi left. *They aren't such bad fellows, those Impies. They were brave and honorable enemies, and*

they've been lenient conquerors as such things go. But when we hit the Black Nebula—

He shuddered. "Wocha, get that whiskey out of my trunk."

"You not going to get drunk again, boss?" The Donarrian's voice rumbled disappointment.

"I am. And I'm going to try to stay drunk the whole damn voyage. You just don't know what we're heading for, Wocha."

Stranger, go back.

Spaceman, go home. Turn back, adventurer.

It is death. Return, human.

The darkness whispered. Voices ran down the length of the ship, blending with the unending murmur of the drive, urging, commanding, whispering so low that it seemed to be within men's skulls.

Basil Donovan lay in darkness. His mouth tasted foul, and there was a throb in his temples and a wretchedness in his throat. He lay and listened to the voice which had wakened him.

Go home, wanderer. You will die, your ship will plunge through the hollow dark till the stars grow cold. Turn home, human.

"Boss. I hear them, boss. I'm scared."

"How long have we been under weigh? When did we leave Ansa?"

"A week ago, boss, maybe more. You been drunk. Wake up, boss, turn on the light. They're whispering in the dark, and I'm scared."

"We must be getting close."

Return. Go home. First comes madness and then comes death and then comes the spinning outward forever. Turn back, spaceman.

Bodiless whisper out of the thick thrumming dark, sourceless all-pervading susurration, and it mocked, there was the cruel cynical scorn of the outer vastness running up and down the laughing voice. It murmured, it jeered, it ran along nerves with little icy feet and flowed through the brain, it called and giped and hungered. It warned them to go back, and it knew they wouldn't and railed its mockery at them for it. Demon whisper, there in the huge cold lone-

liness, sneering and grinning and waiting.

Donovan sat up and groped for the light switch. "We're close enough," he said tonelessly. "We're in their range now."

Footsteps racketed in the corridor outside. A sharp rap on his door. "Come in. Come in and enjoy yourself."

III

DONOVAN hadn't found the switch before the door was open and light spilled in from the hallway fluorotubes. Cold white light, a shaft of it picking out Wocha's monstrous form and throwing grotesque shadows on the walls. Commander Jansky was there, in full uniform, and Ensign Jeanne Scoresby, her aide. The younger girl's face was white, her eyes enormous, but Jansky wore grimness like an armor.

"All right, Donovan," she said. "You've had your binge, and now the trouble is starting. You didn't say they were voices."

"They could be anything," he answered, climbing out of the bunk and steadying himself with one hand. His head swam a little. The corners of the room were thick with shadow.

Back, spaceman. Turn home, human.

"Delusions?" The man laughed unpleasantly. His face was pale and gaunt, unshaven in the bleak radiance. "When you start going crazy, I imagine you always hear voices."

There was contempt in the gray eyes that raked him. "Donovan, I put a technician to work on it when the noises began a few hours ago. He recorded them. They're very faint, and they seem to originate just outside the ear of anyone who hears them, but they're real enough. Radiations don't speak in human Anglic with an accent such as I never heard before. Not unless they're carrier waves for a message. Donovan, who or what is inside the Black Nebula?"

The Ansan's laugh jarred out again. "Who or what is inside this ship?" he challenged. "Our great human science has no way of making the air vibrate by itself. Maybe there are ghosts, standing invisible just beside us and whispering in our ears."

"We could detect nothing, no radiations, no energy-fields, nothing but the sounds

themselves. I refuse to believe that matter can be set in motion without some kind of physical force being applied." Jansky clapped a hand to her sidearm. "You know what is waiting for us. You know how they do it."

"Go ahead. Hypnoprobe me. Lay me out helpless for a week. Or shoot me if you like. You'll be just as dead whatever you do."

Her tones were cold and sharp. "Get on your clothes and come up to the bridge."

He shrugged, picked up his uniform, and began to shuck his pajamas. The women looked away.

Human, go back. You will go mad and die.

Valduma, he thought, with a wrenching deep inside him. *Valduma, I've returned.*

He stepped over to the mirror. The Ansan uniform was a gesture of defiance, and it occurred to him that he should shave if he wore it in front of these Terrans. He ran the electric razor over cheeks and chin, pulled his tunic straight, and turned back. "All right."

They went out into the hallway. A spaceman went by on some errand. His eyes were strained wide, staring at blankness, and his lips moved. The voices were speaking to him.

"It's demoralizing the crew," said Jansky. "It has to stop."

"Go ahead and stop it," jeered Donovan. "Aren't you the representative of the almighty Empire of Sol? Command them in the name of His Majesty to stop."

"The crew, I mean," she said impatiently. "They've got no business being frightened by a local phenomenon."

"Any human would be," answered Donovan. "You are, though you won't admit it. I am. We can't help ourselves. It's instinct."

"Instinct?" Her clear eyes were a little surprised.

"Sure." Donovan halted before a view-screen. Space blazed and roiled against the reaching darkness. "Just look out there. It's the primeval night, it's the blind unknown where unimaginable inhuman Powers are abroad. We're still the old half-ape, crouched over his fire and trembling while the night roars around us. Our lighted,

heated, metal-armored ship is still the lonely cave-fire, the hearth with steel and stone laid at the door to keep out the gods. When the Wild Hunt breaks through and shouts at us, we must be frightened, it's the primitive fear of the dark. It's part of us."

She swept on, her cloak a scarlet wing flapping behind her. They took the elevator to the bridge.

Donovan had not watched the Black Nebula grow over the days, swell to a monstrous thing that blotted out half the sky, lightlessness fringed with the cold glory of the stars. Now that the ship was entering its tenuous outer fringes, the heavens on either side were blurring and dimming, and the blackness yawned before. Even the densest nebula is a hard vacuum; but tons upon incredible tons of cosmic dust and gas, reaching planetary and interstellar distances on every hand, will blot out the sky. It was like rushing into an endless, bottomless hole, the ship was falling and falling into the pit of Hell.

"I noticed you never looked bow-wards on the trip," said Jansky. There was steel in her voice. "Why did you lock yourself in your cabin and drink like a sponge?"

"I was bored," he replied sullenly.

"You were afraid!" she snapped contemptuously. "You didn't dare watch the Nebula growing. Something happened the last time you were here which sucked the guts out of you."

"Didn't your Intelligence talk to the men who were with me?"

"Yes, of course. None of them would say more than you've said. They all wanted us to come here, but blind and unprepared. Well, Mister Donovan, we're going in!"

The floorplates shook under Wocha's tread. "You not talk to boss that way," he rumbled.

"Let be, Wocha," said Donovan. "It doesn't matter how she talks."

He looked ahead, and the old yearning came alive in him, the fear and the memory, but he had not thought that it would shiver with such a strange gladness.

And—who knew? A bargain—

Valduma, come back to me!

Jansky's gaze on him narrowed, but her voice was suddenly low and puzzled. "You're smiling," she whispered.

He turned from the viewscreen and his laugh was ragged. "Maybe I'm looking forward to this visit, Helena."

"My name," she said stiffly, "is Commander Jansky."

"Out there, maybe. But in here there is no rank, no Empire, no mission. We're all humans, frightened little humans huddling together against the dark." Donovan's smile softened. "You know, Helena, you have very beautiful eyes."

The slow flush crept up her high smooth cheeks. "I want a full report of what happened to you last time," she said. "Now. Or you go under the probe."

Wanderer, it is a long way home. Spaceman, spaceman, your sun is very far away.

"Why, certainly." Donovan leaned against the wall and grinned at her. "Glad to. Only you won't believe me."

She made no reply, but folded her arms and waited. The ship trembled with its forward thrust. Sweat beaded the forehead of the watch officer and he glared around him.

"We're entering the home of all lawlessness," said Donovan. "The realm of magic, the outlaw world of werebeasts and nightgangers. Can't you hear the wings outside? These ghosts are only the first sign. We'll have a plague of witches soon."

"Get out!" she said.

He shrugged. "All right, Helena. I told you you wouldn't believe me." He turned and walked slowly from the bridge.

OUTSIDE was starless, lightless, infinite black. The ship crept forward, straining her detectors, groping into the blind dark while her crew went mad.

Spaceman, it is too late. You will never find your way home again. You are dead men on a ghost ship, and you will fall forever into the Night.

"I saw him, Wong, I saw him down in Section Three, tall and thin and black. He laughed at me, and then there wasn't anything there."

Sound of great wings beating somewhere outside the hull.

Mother, can I have him? Can I have his skull to play with?

Not yet, child. Soon. Soon.

Wicked rain of laughter and the sound

of clawed feet running.

No one went alone. Spacemen First Class Gottfried and Martinez went down a starboard companionway and saw the hooded black form waiting for them. Gottfried pulled out his blaster and fired. The ravening beam sprang backward and consumed him. Martinez lay mumbling in psychobay.

The lights went out. After an hour they flickered back on again, but men had rioted and killed each other in the dark.

Commander Jansky recalled all personal weapons on the grounds that the crew could no longer be trusted with them. The men drew up a petition to get them back. When it was refused, there was muttering of revolt.

Spacemen, you have wandered too far. You have wandered beyond the edge of creation, and now there is only death.

The hours dragged into days. When the ship's timepieces started disagreeing, time ceased to have meaning.

Basil Donovan sat in his cabin. There was a bottle in his hand, but he tried to go slow. He was waiting.

When the knock came, he leaped from his seat and every nerve tightened up and screamed. He swore at himself. They wouldn't knock when they came for him. "Go on, enter—" His voice wavered.

Helena Jansky stepped inside, closing the door after her. She had thinned, and there was darkness in her eyes, but she still bore herself erect. Donovan had to salute the stubborn courage that was in her. The unimaginative peasant blood—no, it was more than that, she was as intelligent as he, but there was a deep strength in that tall form, a quiet vitality which had perhaps been bred out of the Families of Ansa. "Sit down," he invited.

She sighed and ran a hand through her dark hair. "Thanks."

"Drink?"

"No. Not on duty."

"And the captain is always on duty. Well, let it go." Donovan lowered himself to the bunk beside her, resting his feet on Wocha's columnar leg. The Donarrian muttered and whimpered in his sleep. "What can I do for you?"

Her gaze was steady and grave. "You can tell me the truth."

"About the Nebula? Why should I? Give me one good reason why an Ansan should care what happens to a Solarian ship."

"Perhaps only that we're all human beings here, that those boys have earth and rain and sunlight and wives waiting for them."

And Valdama—no, she isn't human. Fire and ice and storming madness, but not human. Too beautiful to be flesh.

"This trip was your idea," he said defensively.

"Donovan, you wouldn't have played such a foul trick and made such a weak, self-righteous excuse in the old days."

He looked away, feeling his cheeks hot. "Well," he mumbled, "why not turn around, get out of the Nebula if you can, and maybe come back later with a task force?"

"And lead them all into this trap? Our subtronics are out, you know. We can't send information back, so we'll just go on and learn a little more and then try to fight our way home."

His smile was crooked. "I may have been baiting you, Helena. But if I told you everything I know, it wouldn't help. There isn't enough."

Her hand fell strong and urgent on his. "Tell me, then! Tell me anyway."

"But there is so little. There's a planet somewhere in the Nebula, and it has inhabitants with powers I don't begin to understand. But among other things, they can project themselves hyperwise, just like a spaceship, without needing engines to do it. And they have a certain control over matter and energy."

"The fringe stars—these beings in the Nebula really have been their 'gods'?"

"Yes. They've projected themselves, terrorized the natives for centuries, and carry home the sacrificial materials for their own use. They're doubtless responsible for all the ships around here that never came home. They don't like visitors." Donovan saw her smile, and his own lips twitched. "But they did, I suppose, take some prisoners, to learn our language and anything else they could about us."

She nodded. "I'd conjectured as much. If you don't accept theories involving the supernatural, and I don't, it follows almost

necessarily. If a few of them projected themselves aboard and hid somewhere, they could manipulate air molecules from a distance so as to produce the whisperings—" She smiled afresh, but the hollowness was still in her. "When you call it a new sort of ventriloquism, it doesn't sound nearly so bad, does it?"

Fiercely, the woman turned on him. "And what have you had to do with them? How are you so sure?"

"I—talked with one of them," he replied slowly. "You might say we struck up a friendship of sorts. But I learned nothing, and the only benefit I got was escaping. I've no useful information." His voice sharpened. "And that's all I have to say."

"Well, we're going on!" Her head lifted proudly.

Donovan's smile was a crooked grimace. He took her hand, and it lay unresisting between his fingers. "Helena," he said, "you've been trying to psychoanalyze me this whole trip. Maybe it's my turn now. You're not so hard as you tell yourself."

"I am an officer of the Imperial Navy." Her haughtiness didn't quite come off.

"Sure, sure. A hard-shelled career girl. Only you're also a healthy human being. Down underneath, you want a home and kids and quiet green hills. Don't lie to yourself, that wouldn't be fitting to the Lady Jansky of Torgandale, would it? You went into service because it was the thing to do. And you're just a scared kid, my dear." Donovan shook his head. "But a very nice-looking kid."

Tears glimmered on her lashes. "Stop it," she whispered desperately. "Don't say it."

He kissed her, a long slow kiss with her mouth trembling under his and her body shivering ever so faintly. The second time she responded, shy as a child, hardly aware of the sudden hunger.

SHE pulled free then, sat with eyes wide and wild, one hand lifted to her mouth. "No," she said, so quietly he could scarce hear. "No, not now—"

Suddenly she got up and almost fled. Donovan sighed.

Why did I do that? To stop her inquir-

ing too closely? Or just because she's honest and human, and Valduma isn't? Or—

Darkness swirled before his eyes. Wocha came awake and shrank against the farther wall, terror rattling in his throat. "Boss—boss, she's here again—"

Donovan sat unstirring, elbows on knees, hands hanging empty, and looked at the two who had come. "Hello, Valduma," he said.

"Basil—" Her voice sang against him, rippling, lilted, the unending sharp laughter beneath its surprise. "Basil, you have come back."

"Uh-huh." He nodded at the other. "You're Morzach, aren't you? Sit down. Have a drink. Old home week."

The creature from Arzun remained erect. He looked human on the outside, tall and gaunt in a black cape which glistened with tiny points of starlight, the hood thrown back so that his red hair fell free to his shoulders. The face was long and thin, chiseled to an ultimate refinement of classical beauty, white and cold. Cold as space-tempered steel, in spite of the smile on the pale lips, in spite of the dark mirth in the slant green eyes. One hand rested on the jeweled hilt of a sword.

Valduma stood beside Morzach for an instant, and Donovan watched her with the old sick wildness rising and clamoring in him.

You are the fairest thing which ever was between the stars, you are ice and flame and living fury, stronger and weaker than man, cruel and sweet as a child a thousand years old, and I love you. But you are not human, Valduma.

She was tall, and her grace was a lithe rippling flow, wind and fire and music made flesh, a burning glory of hair rushing past her black-caped shoulders, hands slim and beautiful, the strange clean-molded face white as polished ivory, the mouth red and laughing, the eyes long and oblique and gold-flecked green. When she spoke, it was like singing in Heaven and laughter in Hell. Donovan looked at her, not moving.

"Basil, you came back to me?"

"He came because he had to." Morzach of Arzun folded his arms, eyes smoldering in anger. "Best we kill him now."

"Later, perhaps later, but not now." Valduma laughed aloud.

Suddenly she was in Donovan's arms. Her kisses were a rain of fire. There was thunder and darkness and dancing stars. He was aware of nothing else, not for a long, long time.

She leaned back in his grasp, smiling up at him, stroking his hair with one slender hand.

His cheek was bloody where she had scratched him. He looked back into her eyes—they were cat's eyes, split-pupiled, all gold and emerald without the human white. She laughed very softly. "Shall I kill you now?" she whispered. "Or drive you mad first? Or let you go again? What would be most amusing, Basil?"

"This is no time for your pranks," said Morzach sharply. "We have to deal with this ship. It's getting dangerously close to Arzun, and we've been unable yet to break the morale and discipline of the crew. I think the only way is to wreck the ship."

"Wreck it on Arzun, yes!" Valduma's laughter pulsed and throbbed. "Bring them to their goal. Help them along, even. Oh, yes, Morzach, it is a good thought!"

"We'll need your help," said the creature-man to Donovan. "I take it that you're guiding them. You must encourage them to offer no resistance when we take over the controls. Our powers won't stand too long against atomic energy."

"Why should I help you?" Donovan's tones were hoarse. "What can you give me?"

"If you live," said Valduma, "and can make your way to Drogobych, I might give you much." She laughed again, maniac laughter which did not lose its music. "That would be diverting!"

"I don't know," he groaned. "I don't know—I thought a bargain could be made, but now I wonder."

"I leave him to you," said Morzach sardonically, and vanished.

"Basil," whispered Valduma. "Basil, I have—sometimes—missed you."

"Get out, Wocha," said Donovan.

"Boss—she's toombar—"

"Get out!"

Wocha lumbered slowly from the cabin. There were tears in his eyes.

IV

THE *Ganymede's* engines rose to full power and the pilot controls spun over without a hand on them.

"Engine room! Engine room! Stop that nonsense down there!"

"We can't—they're frozen—the converter has gone into full without us—"

"Sir, I can't budge this stick. It's locked somehow."

The lights went out. Men screamed.

"Get me a flashlight!" snapped Takahashi in the dark. "I'll take this damned panel apart myself."

The beam etched his features against night. "Who goes?" he cried.

"It's I," Jansky appeared in the dim reflected glow. "Never mind, Takahashi. Let the ship have her way."

"But ma'm, we could crash—"

"I've finally gotten Donovan to talk. He says we're in the grip of some kind of powerbeam. They'll pull us to one of their space stations and then maybe we can negotiate—or fight. Come on, we've got to quiet the men."

The flashlight went out. Takahashi's laugh was shrill. "Better quiet me first, Captain."

Her hand was on his arm, steadying, strengthening. "Don't fail me, Tetsuo. You're the last one I've got. I just had to paralyze Scoresby."

"Thanks—thanks, chief. I'm all right now. Let's go."

They fumbled through blindness. The engines roared, full speed ahead with a ghost on the bridge. Men were stumbling and cursing and screaming in the dark. Someone switched on the battle-stations siren, and its howl was the last voice of insanity.

Struggle in the dark, wrestling, paralyzing the berserk, calling on all the iron will which had lifted humankind to the stars—slow restoration of order, men creeping to general quarters, breathing heavily in the guttering light of paper torches.

The engines cut off and the ship snapped into normal matter state. Helena Jansky saw blood-red sunlight through the viewport. There was no time to sound the alarm before the ship crashed.

"A hundred men. No more than a hundred men alive."

She wrapped her cloak tight about her against the wind and stood looking across the camp. The streaming firelight touched her face with red, limning it against the utter dark of the night heavens, sheening faintly in the hair that blew wildly around her strong bitter countenance. Beyond, other fires danced and flickered in the gloom, men huddled around them while the cold seeped slowly to their bones. Here and there an injured human moaned.

Across the ragged spine of bare black hills they could still see the molten glow of the wreck. When it hit, the atomic converters had run wild and begun devouring the hull. There had barely been time for the survivors to drag themselves and some of the cripples free, and to put the rocky barrier between them and the mounting radioactivity. During the slow red sunset, they had gathered wood, hewing with knives at the distorted scrub trees reaching above the shale and snow of the valley. Now they sat waiting out the night.

Takahashi shuddered. "God, it's cold!"

"It'll get colder," said Donovan tonelessly. "This is an old planet of an old red dwarf sun. Its rotation has slowed. The nights are long."

"How do you know?" Lieutenant Elijah Cohen glared at him out of a crudely bandaged face. The firelight made his eyes gleam red. "How do you know unless you're in with them? Unless you arranged this yourself?"

Wocha reached forth a massive fist. "You shut up," he rumbled.

"Never mind," said Donovan. "I just thought some things would be obvious. You saw the star, so you should know it's the type of a burned-out dwarf. Since planets are formed at an early stage of a star's evolution, this world must be old too. Look at these rocks—citrified, back when the stellar energy output got really high just before the final collapse; and nevertheless eroded down to bare snags. That takes millions of years."

He reflected that his reasoning, while sound enough, was based on foreknown conclusions. *Cohen's right. I have betrayed them. It was Valduma, watching over me,*

who brought Wocha and myself unhurt through the crash. I saw, Valduma, I saw you with your hair flying in the chaos, riding witch-like through sundering ruin, and you were laughing. Laughing! He felt ill.

"Nevertheless, the planet has a thin but breathable atmosphere, frozen water, and vegetable life," said Takahashi. "Such things don't survive the final hot stage of a sun without artificial help. This planet has natives. Since we were deliberately crashed here, I daresay the natives are our earlier friends." He turned dark accusing eyes on the Ansan. "How about it, Donovan?"

"I suppose you're right," he answered. "I knew there was a planet in the Nebula, the natives had told me that in my previous trip. This star lies near the center, in a 'hollow' region where there isn't enough dust to force the planet into its primary, and shares a common velocity with the Nebula. It stays here, in other words."

"You told me—" Helena Jansky bit her lip, then slowly forced the words out: "You told me, and I believed you, that there was nothing immediately to fear when the Nebulites took over our controls. So we didn't fight them; we didn't try to overcome their forces with our own engines. And it cost us the ship and over half her crew."

"I told you what happened to me last time," he lied steadfastly. "I can't help it if things were different this trip."

She turned her back. The wind blew a thin hissing veil of dry snow across her ankles. A wounded man suddenly screamed out there in the dark.

How does it feel, Donovan? You made her trust you and then betrayed her for a thing that isn't even human. How does it feel to be a Judas?

"NEVER mind recriminations," said Takahashi. "This isn't the time to hold trials. We've got to decide what to do."

"They have a city on this planet," said Donovan. "Drogobych, they call it, and the planet's name is Arzun. It lies somewhere near the equator, they told me once. If they meant us to make our own way to it—and it would be like them—then it may well lie due south. We can march that way, assuming that the sun set in the west."

"Nothing to lose," shrugged the Terran. "But we haven't many weapons, a few assorted sidearms is all, and they aren't much use against these creatures anyway."

Something howled out in the darkness. The ground quivered, ever so faintly, to the pounding of heavy feet.

"Wild animals yet!" Cohen grinned humorlessly. "Better sound battle stations, Captain."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so." She blew her whistle, a thin shrilling in the windy dark. As she turned around, Donovan saw a gleam running along her cheek. Tears?

The noise came closer. They heard the rattle of claws on stone. The Terrans moved together, guns in front, clubs and rocks and bare hands behind. They have guts, thought Donovan. God, but they have guts!

"Food would be scarce on a barren planet like this," said Ensign Chundra Dass. "We seem to be elected."

The hollow roar sounded, echoing between the hills and caught up by the thin harrying wind. "Hold fire," said Helena. Her voice was clear and steady. "Don't waste charges. Wait—"

The thing leaped out of darkness, a ten-meter length of gaunt scaled body and steel-hard claws and whipping tail, soaring through the snow-streaked air and caught in the vague uneasy firelight. Helena's blaster crashed, a lightning bolt sizzled against the armored head.

The monster screamed. Its body tumbled shatteringly among the humans, it seized a man in its jaws and shook him and trampled another underfoot. Takahashi stepped forward and shot again at its dripping wound. The blaster bolt zigzagged wildly off the muzzle of his gun.

Even the animals can do it—!

"I'll get him, boss!" Wocha reared on his hind legs, came down again with a thud, and charged. Stones flew from beneath his feet. The monster's tail swept out, a man tumbled before it with his ribs caved in, and Wocha staggered as he caught the blow. Still he rushed in, clutching the barbed end of the tail to his breast. The monster writhed, bellowing. Another blaster bolt hit it from the rear. It turned, and a shot at its eyes veered away.

Wocha hit it with all the furious momentum he had. He rammed its spearlike tail down the open jaws and blood spurted. "Ho, Donovan!" he shouted. As the thing screamed and snapped at him, he caught its jaws in his hands.

"Wocha!" yelled Donovan. "Wocha!" He ran wildly toward the fight.

The Donarrian's great back arched with strain. It was as if they could hear his muscles crack. Slowly, slowly, he forced the jaws wider. The monster lashed its body, pulling him to his knees, dragging him over the ground, and still he fought.

"Damn you," he roared in the whirling dust and snow, "hold still!"

The jaws broke. And the monster screamed once more, and then it wasn't there. Wocha tumbled over.

Donovan fell across him, sobbing, laughing, cursing. Wocha picked him up. "You all right, boss?" he asked. "You well?"

"Yes—yes—oh, you blind bloody fool! You stupid, blundering ass!" Donovan hugged him.

"Gone," said Helena. "It vanished."

They picked up their dead and wounded and returned to the fires. The cold bit deep. Something else hooted out in the night.

It was a long time before Takahashi spoke. "You might expect it," he said. "These parapsychical powers don't come from nowhere. The intelligent race, our enemies of Drogobych, simply have them highly developed; the animals do to a lesser extent. I think it's a matter of life being linked to the primary atomic probabilities, the psi functions which give the continuous-field distribution of matter-energy in space-time. In a word, control of external matter and energy by conscious will acting through the unified field which is space-time. Telekinesis."

"Uh-huh," said Dass wearily. "Even some humans have a slight para power. Control dice or electron beams or what have you. But why aren't the—what did you call them?—Arzunians overrunning the Galaxy?"

"They can only operate over a certain range, which happens to be about the distance to the fringe stars," said Donovan. "Beyond that distance, dispersion limits them, plus the fact that differences of po-

tential energy must be made up from their own metabolism. The animals, of course, have very limited range, a few kilometers perhaps. The Arzunians use telekinesis to control matter and energy, and the same subspatial principles as our ships to go faster than light. Only since they aren't lugging around a lot of hull and passengers and assorted machinery—just themselves and a little air and maybe an armful of sacrificial goods from a fringe planet. They don't need atomic engines.

"They aren't interested in conquering the Galaxy. Why should they be? They can get all their needs and luxuries from the peoples to whom they are gods. An old race, very old, decadent if you will. But they don't like interference."

Takahashi looked at him sharply. "I glimpsed one of them on the ship," he said. "He carried a spear."

"Yeah. Another reason why they aren't conquerors. They have no sense for mechanics at all. Never had any reason to evolve one when they could manipulate matter directly without more than the simplest tools. They're probably more intelligent than humans in an all-around way, but they don't have the type of brain and the concentration needed to learn physics and chemistry. Aren't interested, either."

"So, swords against guns— We may have a chance!"

"They can turn your missiles, remember. Guns are little use, you have to distract them so they don't notice your shot till too late. But they can't control you. They aren't telepaths and their type of matter-control is heterodyned by living nerve currents. You could kill one of them with a sword where a gun would most likely kill you."

"I—see—" Helena looked strangely at him. "You're becoming very vocal all of a sudden."

Donovan rubbed his eyes and shivered in the cold. "What of it? You wanted the truth. You're getting it."

Why am I telling them? Why am I not just leading them to the slaughter as Valduma wanted? Is it that I can't stand the thought of Helena being bunted like a beast?

Whose side am I on? he thought wildly. Takahashi gestured and his voice came

eager. "That's it. That's it! The ship scattered assorted metal and plastic over twenty hectares as she fell. Safe for us to gather up tomorrow. We can use our blaster flames to shape weapons. Swords, axes, spears. By the Galaxy, we'll arm ourselves and then we'll march on Drogobych!"

V

IT WAS a strange little army, thought Donovan, as strange as any the Galaxy had ever seen.

He looked back. The old ruined highway went down a narrow valley between sheer cliffs of eroded black stone reaching up toward the deep purplish heaven. The sun was wheeling westerly, a dull red ember throwing light like clotted blood on the dreariness of rock and ice and gaunt gray trees; a few snowflakes, borne on a thin chill wind, drifted across the path of march. A lonely bird, cruel-beaked and watchful, hovered on great black wings far overhead, waiting for them to die.

The men of the Imperial Solar Navy walked close together. They were haggard and dirty and bearded, clad in such ragged articles as they had been able to salvage, armed with the crudely forged weapons of a vanished age, carrying their sick and wounded on rude litters. Ghost world, ghost army, marching through an echoing windy solitude to its unknown weird—but men's faces were still brave, and one of them was singing. The sunburst banner of the Empire flapped above them, the one splash of color in the great murky landscape.

Luck had been with them, of a sort. Game animals had appeared in more abundance than one would have thought the region could support, deer-like things which they shot for meat to supplement their iron rations. They had stumbled on the old highway and followed its arrow-straight course southward. Many days and many tumbled hollow ruins of great cities lay behind them, and still they trudged on.

Luck? wondered Donovan. *I think it was intentional. I think the Arzunians want us to reach Drogobych.*

He heard the scrape of boots on the slanting hillside behind him, and turned around

to face Helena. He stopped and smiled. There had been a slow unspoken intimacy growing between them as they worked and struggled together. Not many words, but the eyes of each would often stray to the other, and a hand would brush over a hand as if by accident. Tired and hungry and road-stained, cap set askew on tangled hair, skin reddened by wind and blued with cold, she was still good to look on.

"Why are you walking so far from the road?" she asked.

"Oh serving as outrider, maybe," he said, resuming his stride. She fell into step beside him. "Up here you get a wider view."

"Do you think we have much further to go, Basil?"

He shrugged.

"We'd never have come this far without you," she said, looking down at her scuffed boots. "You and Wocha and Takahashi."

"Maybe the Empire will send a rescue mission when we don't come back," he suggested.

"No doubt they will. But they can't find one little star in this immensity. Even thermocouples won't help, the Nebula diffuses radiation too much. And they'd be blundering into the same trap as we." Helena looked up. "No, Basil, we've got to fight our way clear alone."

There was a long stretch of thicket growing on the hillside. Donovan went along the right of it, cutting off view of the army. "You know," he said, "you and those boys down there make me feel a lot kinder toward the Empire."

"Thank you. Thank you. We—" She took his arm. "It's a question of unifying the human race, ultimately this whole region of stars, and— *Oh!*"

The beasts were suddenly there in front of them, lean black things which snarled with mouths of hunger. One of them circled toward the humans' flank, the other crouched. Donovan yanked his sword clear.

"Get behind me," he snapped, turning to face the approaching hunter.

"No—back to back—" Helena's own blade rasped from its sheath. She lifted a shout for help.

The nearest animal sprang for her throat. She hacked wildly, the blade twisted in her hand and scraped the muzzled face.

Jaws clamped on the edged steel and let go with a bloody howl. Donovan swung at the other beast, the blow shuddered home and it screamed and writhed and snapped at his ankles.

Whirling, he turned on the thing which had launched itself at Helena. He hewed, and the animal wasn't there, his blade rang on naked stone. A weight crashed against his back, he went down and the teeth clamped on his shoulder.

Helena swung. The carnivore raised its head to snarl at her, and she gripped the sword in both hands and stabbed. It threshed wildly, dying, spewing blood over the hillside. The other, wounded creature disappeared.

Helena bent over Donovan, held him close, her eyes wild. "Are you hurt? Basil. Oh Basil, are you hurt?"

"No," he muttered. "The teeth didn't have time to work through this heavy jacket." He pulled her head down against his.

"Basil, Basil!"

He rose, still holding her to him. Her arms locked about his neck, and there were tears and laughter in her voice. "Oh, Basil, my darling."

"Helena," he murmured. "I love you, Helena."

"When we get home—I'm due for furlough, I'll retire instead—your house on Ansa—Oh, Basil, I never thought I could be so glad!"

The massive thunder of feet brought them apart. Wocha burst around the thicket, swinging his giant ax in both hands. "Are you all right, boss?" he roared.

"Yes, yes, we're all right. A couple of those damned wolf-like things which've been plaguing us the whole march. Go on back, Wocha, we'll join you soon."

The Donatrian's ape-face split in a vast grin. "So you take a female, boss?" he cried. "Good, good, we need lots of little Donovans at home!"

"Get on back, you old busybody, and keep that gossiping mouth shut!"

Hours later, Helena returned to the army where it was making camp. Donovan stayed where he was, looking down at the men where they moved about gathering wood and digging fire-pits. The blazes were a note

of cheer in the thickening murk.

Helena, he thought. Helena. She's a fine girl, wonderful girl, she's what the thinning Family blood and I, myself, need. But why did I do it? Why did I talk that way to her? Just then, in the strain and fear and loneliness, it seemed as if I cared. But I don't. She just another woman. She's not Valduma.

THE TWILIGHT murmured, and he saw the dim sheen of metal beside him. The men of Drogobych were gathering.

They stood tall and godlike in helmet and ring-mail and night-black cloaks, leaning on swords and spears, death-white faces cold with an ancient scorn as they looked down on the human camp. Their eyes were phosphorescent green in the dark.

Donovan nodded, without fear or surprise or anything but a sudden great weariness. He remembered some of them from the days when he had been alone in the bows of the ship with the invaders while his men cowered and rioted and went crazy in the stern sectors. "Hello, Morzach, Uboda, Zegoian, Korstuzan, Davleka," he said. "Welcome back again."

Valduma walked out of the blood-hued twilight, and he took her in his arms and held her for a long fierce time. Her kiss was as cruel as a swooping hawk. She bit his lips and he tasted blood warm and salt where she had been. Afterward she turned in the circle of his arm and they faced the silent men of Drogobych.

"You are getting near the city," said Morzach. His tones were deep, with the chill ringing of struck steel in them. "It is time for the next stage."

"I thought you saved some of us deliberately," said Donovan.

"Us?" Valduma's lips caressed his cheek. "Them, Basil, them. You don't belong there, you are with Arzun and me."

"You must have projected that game where we could spot it," went on Donovan, shakily. "You've kept us—them—alive and enabled us to march on your city—on the last inhabited city left to your race. You could have hunted them down as you did all the others, made sport of them with wild animals and falling rocks and missiles shooting out of nowhere, but instead you

want them for something else. What is it?"

"You should have guessed," said Morzach. "We want to leave Arzun."

"Leave it? You can do so any time, by yourselves. You've done it for millennia."

"We can only go to the barbarian fringe stars. Beyond them it is a greater distance to the next suns than we can cross unaided. Yet though we have captured many spaceships and have them intact at Drogobych, we cannot operate them. The principles learned from the humans don't make sense! When we have tired to pilot them, it has only brought disaster."

"But why do you want to leave?"

"It is a recent decision, precipitated by your arrival, but it has been considered for a long while. This sun is old, this planet exhausted, and the lives of we few remnants of a great race flicker in a hideous circumscribed drabness. Sooner or later, the humans will fight their way here in strength too great for us. Before then we must be gone."

"So—" Donovan spoke softly, and the wind whimpered under his voice. "So your plan is to capture this group of spacemen and make them your slaves, to carry you—where?"

"Out. Away." Valduma's clear lovely laughter rang in the night. "To seize another planet and build our strength afresh." She gripped his waist and he saw the white gleam of her teeth out of shadow. "To build a great army of obedient spacegoing warriors—and then out to hunt between the stars!"

"Hunt—"

"Look here." Morzach edged closer, his eyes a green glow, the vague sheen of naked steel in his hand. "I've been polite long enough. You have your chance, to rise above the human scum that spawned you and be one of us. Help us now and you can be with us till you die. Otherwise, we'll take that crew anyway, and you'll be hounded across the face of this planet."

"Aye—aye—welcome back, Basil Donovan, welcome back to the old king-race . . . Come with us, come with us, lead the humans into our ambush and be the lord of stars . . ."

They circled about him, tall and mailed and beautiful in the shadow-light, luring

whispering voices, ripple of dark laughter, the hunters playing with their quarry and taming it. Donovan remembered them, remembered the days when he had talked and smiled and drunk and sung with them, the Lucifer-like intoxication of their dancing darting minds, a wildness of magic and mystery and reckless wizard sport, a glory which had taken something from his soul and left an emptiness within him. Morzach, Marovech, Uboda, Zegoian, for a time he had been the consort of the gods.

"Basil." Valduma laid sharp-nailed fingers in his hair and pulled his lips to hers. "Basil, I want you back."

He held her close, feeling the lithe savage strength of her, recalling the flame-like beauty and the nights of love such as no human could ever give. His whisper was thick: "You got bored last time and sent me back. How long will I last now?"

"As long as you wish, Basil. Forever and forever." He knew she lied, and he didn't care.

"This is what you must do, Donovan," said Morzach.

He listened with half his mind. It was a question of guiding the army into a narrow cul-de-sac where the Arzunians could perform the delicate short-range work of causing chains to bind around them. For the rest, he was thinking.

They hunt. They intrigue, and they whittle down their last few remnants with fighting among themselves, and they prey on the fringe stars, and they capture living humans to hunt down for sport. They haven't done anything new for ten thousand years, creativeness has withered from them, and all they will do if they escape the Nebula is carry ruin between the stars. They're mad.

Yes—a whole society of psychopaths, gone crazy with the long racial dying. That's the real reason they can't handle machines, that's why they don't think of friendship but only of war, that's why they carry doom within them.

But I love you, I love you, I love you, O Valduma the fair.

He drew her to him, kissed her with a terrible intensity, and she laughed in the dark. Looking up, he faced the blaze that was Morzach.

"All right," he said. "I understand. Tomorrow."

"Aye—good, good, well done!"

"Oh, Basil, Basil!" whispered Valduma.

"Come, come away with me, now."

"No. They'd suspect. I have to go down to them or they'll come looking for me."

"Good night, Basil, my darling, my vorza. Until tomorrow!"

He went slowly down the hillside, drawing his shoulders together against the cold, not looking back. Helena rose when he approached her campfire, and the flimmering light made her seem pale and unreal.

"Where have you been, Basil? You look so tired."

"Just walking around. I'm all right." He spread his couch of stiff and stinking animal hides. "We'd better turn in, eh?"

But he slept little.

VI

THE HIGHWAY curved between great looming walls of cragged old rock, a shadow tunnel with the wind yowling far overhead and the sun a disc of blood. Men's footfalls echoed from the cracked paving blocks to boom hollowly off time-gnawed cliffs and ring faintly in the ice. It was cold, their breath smoked from them and they shivered and cursed and stamped their feet.

Donovan walked beside Helena, who was riding Wocha. His eyes narrowed against the searching wind, looking ahead and around, looking for the side track where the ambush waited. Drogobych was very near.

Something moved up on the ridge, a flapping black thing which was instantly lost to sight. The Arzunians were watching.

There—up ahead—the solitary tree they had spoken of, growing out between age-crumbled fragments of the road. The highway swung west around a pinnacle of rock, but here there was a branch road running straight south into a narrow ravine. *All I have to do is suggest we take it. They won't know till too late that it leads up a blind canyon.*

Helena leaned over toward him, so that the long wind-whipped hair blew against his cheek. "Which way should we go?" she asked. One hand rested on his shoulder.

He didn't slacken his stride, but his voice was low under the whine of bitter air: "To the right, Helena, and on the double. The Arzunians are waiting up the other road, but Drogobych is just beyond that crag."

"Basil! How do you know—"

Wocha's long hairy ears cocked attentively, and the little eyes under the heavy bone ridges were suddenly sharp on his master.

"They wanted me to mislead you. I didn't say anything before for fear they'd be listening, somehow."

Because I hadn't decided, he thought grayly. Because Valduma is mad, and I love her.

Helena turned and lifted her arm, voice ringing out to rattle in jeering echoes: "Column right! Forward—charge!"

Wocha broke into a trot, the ground booming and shivering under his huge feet. Donovan paced beside, drawing his sword and swinging it naked in one hand, his eyes turned to the canyon and the rocks above it. The humans fell into a jogging run.

They swept past the ambush road, and suddenly Valduma was on the ridge above them, tall and slim and beautiful, the hair like a blowing flame under her helmet. "Basil!" she screamed. "Basil, you triple traitor—"

The others were there with her, men of Drogobych standing on the heights and howling their fury. They had chains in their hands, and suddenly the air was thick with flying links.

One of them smashed against Donovan and curled itself snake-like around his waist. He dropped his sword and tugged at the cold iron, feeling the breath strained out of him, cursing with the pain of it. Wocha reached down a hand and peeled the chain off, snapping it in two and hurling it back at the Arzunians. It whipped in the air, lashing itself across his face, and he bellowed.

The men of Sol were weltering in a fight with the flying chains, beating them off, stamping the writhing lengths underfoot, yelling as the things cracked against their heads. "Forward!" cried Helena. "Charge—get out of here—forward, Empire!"

A chain whistled viciously for her face. She struck at it with her sword, tangling it on the blade, metal clashing on metal. Takahashi had his blaster out, its few remaining charges thundering to fuse the missiles. Other flames roared at the Arzunians, driving them back, forcing them to drop control of the chains to defend their lives.

"Run! Forward!"

The column shouted and plunged down the highway. Valduma was suddenly before them, her face distorted in fury, stabbing a spear at Donovan's breast. The man parried the thrust and hewed at her—she was gone, and the Terrans rushed ahead.

The rocks groaned. Donovan saw them shuddering above him, saw the first hail of gravel and heard the huge grinding of strata. "They're trying to bury us!" he yelled. "We've got to get clear!"

Wocha stooped, snatched him up under one arm, and galloped. A boulder whizzed by his head, smashing against the farther wall and spraying him with hot chips of stone. Now the boom of the landslide filled their world, rolling and roaring between the high cliffs. Cracks zigzagged across the worn black heights, the crags shivered and toppled, dust boiled across the road.

"Basil!"

Donovan saw Valduma again, dancing and leaping between the boulders, raising a scream of wrath and laughter. Morzach was there, standing on a jut of rock, watching the hillside fall.

Wocha burst around the sentinel peak. A line of Arzunians stood barring the way to Drogobych, the sunlight flaming off their metal. Wocha dropped Donovan, hefted his ax in both hands, and charged them.

Donovan picked himself up and scrambled in the wake of his slave. Behind him, the Terrans were streaming from the collapsing dale, out over open ground to strike the enemy. The rocks bounded and howled, a man screamed as he was pinned, there were a dozen buried under the landslide.

Wocha hit the Arzunian line. His ax blazed, shearing off an arm, whirling up again to crumple a helmet and cleave the skull beneath. Rearing, he knocked down two of them and trampled them underfoot.

A warrior smote at his flank. Helena, gripping one mighty shoulder, engaged him with her free hand, her blade whistling around his ears. They fell away from that pair, and the Terrans attacked them.

DONOVAN crossed swords with one he knew—Marovech, the laughing half-devil whose words he had so much enjoyed in earlier days. The Arzunian grinned at him across a web of flying steel. His blade stabbed in, past the Ansan's awkward guard, reaching for his guts. Donovan retreated, abandoning the science he didn't know for a wild whirling and hacking, his iron battering at the bright weapon before him. Clash and clang of edged metal, leaping and dancing, Marovech's red hair wild in the rising wind and his eyes alight with laughter.

Donovan felt his backward step halted, he was against the high stone pillar and could not run. He braced his feet and hewed out, a scream of cloven air and outraged steel. Marovech's sword went spinning from his hand.

It hit the ground and bounced up toward the Arzunian's clutch. Donovan smote again, and the shock of iron in flesh jarred him where he stood. Marovech fell in a rush of blood.

For an instant Donovan stood swaying over the Arzunian, looking stupidly at the blood on his own hands, hearing the clamor of his heartbeat and sucking a dry gasp into his lungs. Then he picked up the fallen being's glaive. It was a better weapon.

Turning, he saw that the fight had become a riot, knots of men and un-men snarling and hacking in a craziness of death. No room or time here for wizard stunts, it was blood and bone and nerve against its kind. The Terrans fought without much skill in the use of their archaic equipment but they had the cold courage blended of training and desperation. And they knew better how to cooperate. They battled a way to each other and stood back to back against all comers.

Wocha raged and trampled, smashing with ax and fist and feet and hurled stones, his war-cry bellowing and shuddering in the hills. An Arzunian vanished from in front of him and appeared behind with spear

poised. The Donarrian suddenly backed up, catching the assailant and smashing him under his hind feet while he dueled another from the front. Helena's arm never rested, she swung to right and left, guarding his flanks yelling as her blade drove home.

Donovan shook himself and trotted warily over to where a tide of Arzunians raged about a closely-drawn ring of Impies. The humans were standing firm, driving each charge back in a rush of blood, heaping the dead before them. But now spears were beginning to fall out of the sky, driven by no hand but stabbing for the throats and eyes and bellies of men. Donovan loped for the sharp edge of the hills, where they toppled to the open country in which the fight went on.

He scrambled up a rubbled slope and gripped a thin pinnacle to swing himself higher. She was there.

She stood on a ledge, the heap of spears at her feet, looking down over the battle and chanting as she sent forth the flying death. He noticed even then how her hair was a red glory about the fine white loveliness of her head.

"Valduma," he whispered, as he struck at her.

She was not there, she sat on a higher ledge and jeered at him. "Come and get me, Basil, darling, darling. Come up here and talk to me!"

He looked at her as Lucifer must have looked back to Heaven. "Let us go," he said. "Give us a ship and send us home."

"And have you bring our overlords back in?" She laughed aloud.

"They aren't so bad, Valduma. The Empire means peace and justice for all races."

"Who speaks?" Her scorn flamed at him. "You don't believe that."

He stood there for a moment. "No," he whispered. "No, I don't."

Stooping, he picked up the sheaf of spears and began to crawl back down the rocks. Valduma cursed him from the heights.

There was a break in the combat around the hard-pressed Terran ring as the Arzunians drew back to pant and glare. Donovan ran through and flung his load clashing at the feet of Takahashi.

"Good work," said the officer. "We

need these things. Here, get into the formation. Here we go again!"

The Arzunians charged in a wedge to gather momentum. Donovan braced himself and lifted his sword. The Terrans in the inner ring slanted their spears between the men of the outer defense. For a very long half minute, they stood waiting.

The enemy hit! Donovan hewed at the nearest, drove the probing sword back and hammered against the guard. Then the whirl of battle swept his antagonist away, someone else was there, he traded blows and the howl of men and metal lifted skyward.

The Terrans had staggered a little from the massive assault, but it spitted itself on the inner pikes and then swords and axes went to work. Ha, clang, through the skull and give it to 'em! Hai, Empire! Ansa, Ansa! Clatter and yell and deep-throated roar, the Arzunians boiling around the Solar line, leaping and howling and whipping out of sight—a habit which saved their lives but blunted their attack, thought Donovan in a moment's pause.

Wocha smashed the last few who had been standing before him, looked around to the major struggle, and pawed the ground. "Ready, lady?" he rumbled.

"Aye, ready, Wocha. Let's go!"

The Donarrian backed up to get a long running space. "Hang on tight," he warned. "Never mind fighting, lady. All right!"

He broke into a trot, a canter, and then a full gallop. The earth trembled under his mass. "Hoooo!" he screamed. "Here we come!"

Helena threw both arms around his corded neck. When they hit it was like a nuclear bomb going off.

In a few seconds of murder, Wocha had strewn the ground with smashed corpses, whirled, and begun cutting his way into the disordered main group of the Arzunians. They didn't stand before him. Suddenly they were gone, all of them, except for the dead.

Donovan looked over the field. The dead were thick, thick. He estimated that half the little Terran force was slain or out of action. But they must have taken three or four times their number of Arzunians to

the Black Planet with them. The stony ground was pooled and steaming with blood. Carrion birds stooped low, screaming.

Helena fell from Wocha's back into Donovan's arms. He comforted her wild sobbing, holding her to him and murmuring in her ear and kissing the wet cheeks and lips. "It's over, dear, it's over for now. We drove them away."

She recovered herself in a while and stood up, straightening her torn disarray, the mask of command clamping back over her face. To Takahashi: "How are our casualties?"

He reported. It was much as Donovan had guessed. "But we gave 'em hell for it, didn't we?"

"How is that?" wondered Cohen. He leaned against Wocha, not showing the pain that jagged through him as they bandaged his wounded foot except by an occasional sharp breath. "They're more at home with this cutlery than we, and they have those damned parapsych talents too."

"They're not quite sane," replied Donovan tonelessly. "Whether you call it a cultural trait or a madness which has spread to the whole population, they're a wild bloodthirsty crew, two-legged weasels, and with a superiority complex which wouldn't have let them be very careful in dealing with us. No discipline, no real plan of action." He looked south over the rolling moorland. "Those things count. They may know better next time."

"Next time? Fifty or sixty men can't defeat a planet, Donovan," said Takahashi.

"No. Though this is an old dying race, their whole population in the city ahead, and most of it will flee in panic and take no part in any fighting. They aren't used to victims that fight back. If we can slug our way through to the spaceships they have there—"

"Spaceships!" The eyes stared at him, wild with a sudden blaze of hope, men crowding close and leaning on their redened weapons and raising a babble of voices. "Spaceships, spaceships—home!"

"Yeah." Donovan ran a hand through his yellow hair. The fingers trembled just a bit. "Some ships, the first ones, they merely destroyed by causing the engines to

run loose; but others they brought here, I suppose, by inducing the crew to land and parley. Only they killed the crews and can't handle the machines themselves."

"If they captured ships," said Helena slowly, "then they captured weapons too, and even they can squeeze a trigger."

"Sure. But you didn't see them shooting at us just now, did you? They used all the charges to hunt or duel. So if we can break through and escape—"

"They could still follow us and wreck our engines," said Takahashi.

"Not if we take a small ship, as we'd have to anyway, and mount guard over the vital spots. An Arzunian would have to be close at hand and using all his energies to misdirect atomic flows. He could be killed before any mischief was done. I doubt if they'd even try."

"Besides," went on Donovan, his voice dry and toneless as a lecturing professor's, "they can only do so much at a time. I don't know where they get the power for some of their feats, such as leaving this planet's gravitational well. It can't be from their own metabolisms, it must be some unknown cosmic energy source. They don't know how it works themselves, it's an instinctive ability. But it takes a lot of nervous energy to direct that flow, and I found last time I was here that they have to rest quite a while after some strenuous deed. So if we can get them tired enough—and the fight is likely to wear both sides down—they won't be able to chase us till we're out of their range."

Takahashi looked oddly at him. "You know a lot," he murmured.

"Yeah, maybe I do."

"Well, if the city is close as you say, we'd better march right away before our wounds stiffen, and before the natives get a chance to organize."

"Rig up carrying devices for those too badly hurt to move," said Helena. "The walking wounded can tote them, and the rest of us form a protective square."

"Won't that slow us and handicap us?" asked Donovan.

Her head lifted, the dark hair blowing about her proud features in the thin whimpering wind. "As long as it's humanly possible we're going to look after our men,

What's the Imperium for if it can't protect its own?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose so."

Donovan slouched off to join the salvaging party that was stripping the fallen Arzunians of arms and armor for Terran use. He rolled over a corpse to unbuckle the helmet and looked at the blood-masked face of Korstuzan who had been his friend once, very long ago. He closed the staring eyes, and his own were blind with tears.

Wocha came to join him. The Donarrian didn't seem to notice the gashes in his hide, but he was equipped with a shield now and had a couple of extra swords slung from his shoulders. "You got a good lady, boss," he said. "She fights hard. She will bear you strong sons."

"Uh-huh."

Valduma could never bear my children. Different species can't breed. And she is the outlaw darkness, the last despairing return to primeval chaos, she is the enemy of all which is honest and good. But she is very fair.

Slowly, the humans reformed their army, a tight ring about their wounded, and set off down the road. The dim sun wheeled horizonward.

VII

DROGOBYCH lay before them.

The city stood on the open gray moor, and it had once been large. But its outer structures were long crumbled to ruin, heaps and shards of stone riven by ages of frost, fallen and covered by the creeping dust. Here and there a squared monolith remained like the last snag in a rotted jaw, dark against the windy sky. It was quiet. Nothing stirred in all the sweeping immensity of hill and moor and ruin and loneliness.

Helena pointed from her seat on Wocha, and a lilt of hope was eager in the tired voice: "See—a ship—ahead there!"

They stared, and someone raised a ragged cheer. Over the black square-built houses of the inner city they could make out the metal nose of a freighter. Takahashi squinted. "It's Denebian, I think," he said. "Looks as if man isn't the only race which has suffered from these scum."

"All right, boys," said Helena. "Let's go in and get it."

They went down a long empty avenue which ran spear-straight for the center. The porticoed houses gaped with wells of blackness at their passage, looming in cracked and crazily leaning massiveness on either side, throwing back the hollow slam of their boots. Donovan heard the uneasy mutter of voices to his rear: "*Don't like this place . . . Haunted . . . They could be waiting anywhere for us . . .*"

The wind blew a whirl of snow across their path.

Basil. Basil, my dear.

Donovan's head jerked around, and he felt his throat tighten. Nothing. No movement, no sound, emptiness.

Basil, I am calling you. No one else can hear.

Why are you with these creatures, Basil? Why are you marching with the oppressors of your planet? We could free Ansa, Basil, given time to raise our armies. We could sweep the Terrans before us and bound them down the ways of night. And yet you march against us.

"Valduma," he whispered.

Basil, you were very dear to me. You were something new and strong and of the future; come to our weary old world, and I think I loved you.

I could still love you, Basil. I could hold you forever, if you would let me.

"Valduma—have done!"

A mocking ripple of laughter, sweet as rain in springtime, the gallantry of a race which was old and sick and doomed and could still know mirth. Donovan shook his head and stared rigidly before him. It was as if he had laid hands on that piece of his soul which had been lost, and she was trying to wrench it from him again. Only he wanted her to win.

Go home, Basil. Go home with this female of yours. Breed your cubs, fill the house with brats, and try to think your little round of days means something. Strut about under the blue skies, growing fat and gray, bragging of what a great fellow you used to be and disapproving of the younger generation. As you like, Basil. But don't go out to space again. Don't look at the naked stars. You won't dare.

"No," he whispered.

She laughed, a harsh bell of mockery ringing in his brain. *You could have been a god—or a devil. But you would rather be a pot-bellied Imperial magistrate. Go home, Basil Donovan, take your female home, and when you are awakened at night by her—shall we say her breathing?—do not remember me.*

The Terrans slogged on down the street, filthy with dust and grease and blood, uncouth shamblers, apes in the somber ruin of the gods. Donovan thought he had a glimpse of Valduma standing on a rooftop, the clean lithe fire of her, silken flame of her hair and the green unhuman eyes which had lighted in the dark at his side. She had been a living blaze, an unending trumpet and challenge, and when she broke with him it had been quick and clean, no soddenness of age and custom and—and, damn it, all the little things which made humanness.

All right, Valduma. We're monkeys. We're noisy and self-important, compromisers and trimmers and petty cheats, we buddle away from the greatness we could have, our edifices are laid brick by brick with endless futile squabbling over each one—and yet, Valduma, there is something in man which you don't have. There's something by which these men have fought their way through everything you could loose on them, helping each other, going forward under a ridiculous rag of colored cloth and singing as they went.

Fine words, added his mind. Too bad you don't really believe them.

He grew aware of Helena's anxious eyes on him. "What's the matter, darling?" she asked gently. "You look ill."

"Tired," he said. "But we can't have so very far to go now—"

"Look out!"

Whirling, he saw the pillars of the house to the right buckle, saw the huge stone slabs of the roof come thundering over the top and streetward. For a blinding instant he saw Valduma, riding the slab down, yelling and laughing, and then she was gone and the stone struck.

They were already running, dropping their burden of the hurt and fleeing for safety. Another house groaned and rum-

bled. The ground shook, flying shards stung Donovan's back, echoes rolled down the ways of Drogobych. Someone was screaming, far and faint under the grinding racket.

"Forward. Forward!" Helena's voice whipped back to him, she led the rush while the city thundered about her. Then a veil of rising dust blotted her out, he groped ahead, stumbling over fallen pillars and cornices, hearing the boom around him, running and running.

Valduma laughed, a red flame through the whirling dust. Her spear gleamed for his breast, he grabbed it with one hand and hacked at her with his sword. She was gone, and he raced ahead, not stopping to think, not daring.

They came out on a great open plaza. Once there had been a park here, and carved fountains, but nothing remained save a few leafless trees and broken pieces. And the spaceships.

THE spaceships, a loom of metal against the dark stone beyond, half a dozen standing there and waiting—spaceships, spaceships, the most beautiful sight in the cosmos! Helena and Wocha were halted near a small fast Comet-class scoutboat. The surviving Terrans ran toward them. Few, thought Donovan sickly, few—perhaps a score left, bleeding from the cuts of flying stone, gray with dust and fear. The city had been a trap.

"Come on!" yelled the woman. "Over here and off this planet!"

The men of Drogobych were suddenly there, a ring about the ship and another about the whole plaza, crouched with their weapons and their cat's eyes aflame. A score of hurt starvelings and half a thousand unmen.

A trumpet blew its high note into the dusking heavens. The Arzunians rested arms, expressionless. Donovan and the other humans continued their pace, forming a battle square.

Morzach stood forth in front of the scoutship. "You have no further chance to escape," he called. "But we want your services, not your lives, and the service will be well rewarded. Lay down your weapons."

Wocha's arm straightened. His ax flew like a thunderbolt, and Morzach's head burst

open. The Donarrian roared and went against the enemy line.

They edged away, fearfully, and the Terrans followed him in a trotting wedge. Donovan moved up on Wocha's right side, sword hammering at the thrusts for his ribs.

An Arzunian yelled an order which must have meant "Stop them!" Donovan saw the outer line break into a run, converging on the knot of struggle. No flying spears this time, he reflected in a moment's bleak satisfaction—tearing down those walls must have exhausted most of their directing energies.

A native rushed at him, sword whistling from behind a black shield. Donovan caught the blow on his own plundered scute, feeling it ring in the bones of his arm, and hewed back. His blade screamed close to the white teeth-bared face, and he called a panting salutation: "Try again, Davleka!" "I will!"

The blows rained on his shield, sang viciously low to cut at his legs, clattering and clanging, whistle of air and howl of iron under the westering sun. He backed up against Wocha's side, where the Donarrian and the woman smote against the airlock's defenders, and braced himself and struck out.

Davleka snarled and hacked at Donovan's spread leg. The Ansan's glaive snaked forth against his unshielded neck. Davleka's sword clashed to earth and he sprawled against the human. Raising his bloody face, he drew a knife, lifted it, and tried to thrust upward. Donovan, already crossing blades with Uboda, stamped on his hand. Davleka grinned, a rueful crooked grin through the streaming blood, and died.

Uboda pressed close, working up against Donovan's shield. He had none himself, but there was a dirk in his left hand. His sword locked with Donovan's, strained it aside, and his knife clattered swiftly for an opening.

Helena turned about and struck from her seat. Uboda's head rolled against Donovan's shield and left a red splash down it. The man retched.

Wocha, swinging one of his swords, pushed ahead into the Arzunians, crowding them aside by his sheer mass, beating down

a guard and the helmet or armor beyond it. "Clear!" he bellowed. "I got the way clear, lady!"

Helena sprang to the ground and into the lock. "Takahashi, Cohen, Basil, Wang-ki, come in and help me start the engines. The rest of you hold them off. Don't give them time to exert what collective para power they have left and ruin something. Make them think!"

"Think about their lives, huh?" Wocha squared off in front of the airlock and raised his sword. "All right, boys, here they come. Let 'em have what they want."

Donovan halted in the airlock. Valduma was there, her fiery head whirling in the rush of black-clad warriors. He leaned over and grabbed a spaceman's arm. "Ben Ali, go in and help start this crate. I have to stay here."

"But—"

Donovan shoved him in, stood beside Takahashi, and braced himself to meet the Arzunian charge.

They rushed in, knowing that they had to kill the humans before there was an escape, swinging their weapons and howling. The shock of the assault threw men back, pressed them to the ship and jammed weapons close to breasts. The Terrans cursed and began to use fists and feet, clearing a space to fight in.

Donovan's sword clashed against a shield, drove off another blade, stabbed for a face, and then it was all lost in the crazed maelstrom, hack and thrust and take the blows they give, hew, sword, hew!

They raged against Wocha, careless now of their lives, thundering blows against his shield, slashing and stabbing and using their last wizard strength to fill the air with blades. He roared and stood his ground, the sword leaped in his hand, metal clove in thunder. The shield was crumpled, falling apart—he tossed it with rib-cracking force against the nearest Arzunian. His nicked and blunted sword burst against a helmet, and he drew the other.

The ship trembled, thutter of engines warming up, the eager promise of sky and stars and green Terra again. "Get in!" bawled Donovan. "Get in! We'll hold them!"

He stood by Wocha as the last crewmen

entered, stood barring the airlock with a wall of blood and iron. Through a blurring vision, he saw Valduma approach.

She smiled at him, one slim hand running through the copper hair, the other held out in sign of peace. Tall and gracious and lovely beyond his knowing, she moved up-toward Donovan, and her clear voice rang in his darkening mind.

Basil—you, at least, could stay. You could guide us out to the stars.

"You go away," groaned Wocha.

The devil's rage flamed in her face. She yelled, and a lance whistled from the sky and buried itself in the great breast.

"Wocha!" yelled Donovan.

The Donarrian snarled and snapped off the shaft that stood between his ribs. He whirled it over his head, and Valduma's green eyes widened in fear.

"Donovan!" roared Wocha, and let it fly.

It smashed home, and the Ansan dropped his sword and swayed on his feet. He couldn't look on the broken thing which had been Valduma.

"Boss, you go home now."

Wocha laid him in the airlock and slammed the outer valve shut. Turning, he faced the Arzunians. He couldn't see very well—one eye was gone, and there was a ragged darkness before the other. The sword felt heavy in his hand. But—

"Hooo!" he roared and charged them.

He spitted one and trampled another and tossed a third into the air. Whistling, he clove a head and smashed a rib-case with his fist and chopped another across. His sword broke, and he grabbed two Arzunians and cracked their skulls together.

They ran, then, turned and fled from him. And he stood watching them go and laughed. His laughter filled the city, rolling from its walls, drowning the whistle of the

ship's takeoff and bringing blood to his lips. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand, spat, and lay down.

"We're clear, Basil." Helena clung to him, shivering in his arms, and he didn't know if it was a laugh or a sob in her throat. "We're away, safe, we'll carry word back to Sol and they'll clear the Black Nebula for good."

"Yeah." He rubbed his eyes. "Though I doubt the Navy will find anything. If those Arzunians have any sense, they'll project to various fringe planets, scatter, and try to pass as harmless humanoids. But it doesn't matter, I suppose. Their power is broken."

"And we'll go back to your home, Basil, and bring Ansa and Terra together and have a dozen children and—"

He nodded. "Sure. Sure."

But he wouldn't forget. In the winter nights, when the stars were sharp and cold in a sky of ringing crystal black, he would—go out and watch them? Or pull his roof over him and wait for dawn? He didn't know yet.

Still—even if this was a long ways from being the best of all possible universes, it had enough in it to make a man glad of his day.

He whistled softly, feeling the words run through his head:

*Lift your glasses high,
kiss the girls good-bye,
(Live well, my friend, live well, live
you well)
for we're riding,
for we're riding,
for we're riding out to Terran sky! Terran
sky! Terran sky!*

The thought came all at once that it could be a song of comradeship, too.

The Android Kill

By JOHN JAKES

The android slaves, insipid pieces of metal, plastic and skin, were constructed to work and work and help men like Caffrey relax. But someone, somewhere, made this batch too perfect. Caffrey, big tough Caffrey laughed out loud at the tremendous irony of the joke as he pondered sending his ravaged ship into the burning maw of the sun.

CAFFREY slammed the great steel doors and walked forward through the gym. His bare feet slapped on the mats and the cane of iron-hard Venus jungle wood swung lightly in one hand. He wore only dirty white trousers. Sweat stood shiny on him under the glow of the ceiling lights. He cursed the ship silently for being old and run down and without any cooling units.

His beefy face moved from side to side, watching. The black eyes took in every bit of movement. He saw all that went on. It was his ticket out of the stinking world of frozen-starred space, of Class nine freighters and unholy cargos.

The slender blue-gray androids were exercising. They vaulted on the parallel bars, dangled from the rings, worked with the pulleys. Even the women and the children exercised. They did not sweat, because their bodies were not made for perspiration, but Caffrey could see their muscles twisting and shivering under the slate hides, developing.

A strange kind of noise filled the vast gym. Muted gruntings, whispers of breath, solid slaps of hands and bodies on bars and mats. The androids did not look at Caffrey. They were accustomed to slavery. They knew they had been dead when they were born.

Caffrey stopped walking. Near the left wall, two android males were conversing. They leaned indolently, tiredly, against the brown wooden bars. Caffrey's face lost its flabbiness, becoming stripped of everything but purpose.

He walked toward them, conscious of his own strength. The exercising of the others

went on around him. Slap and soft wind of breath and creak of apparatus. The heat was a nearly-tangible cloud.

"Why aren't you two working out like the rest?" Caffrey asked slowly.

One of the androids said in a weary voice, "I'm tired. I can't when I'm tired."

Caffrey's fingers tightened on the stick. They had to be in perfect shape! *Had to be!* This was his last shipload, and by God . . .

He swung the stick up over his shoulder and brought it down in a blurring arc. There was a flat smacking sound. The android choked. Caffrey struck the other one, and the anger came up from his stomach like fire boiling over. He screamed at them and beat them. Again the stick fell, again, again, again . . .

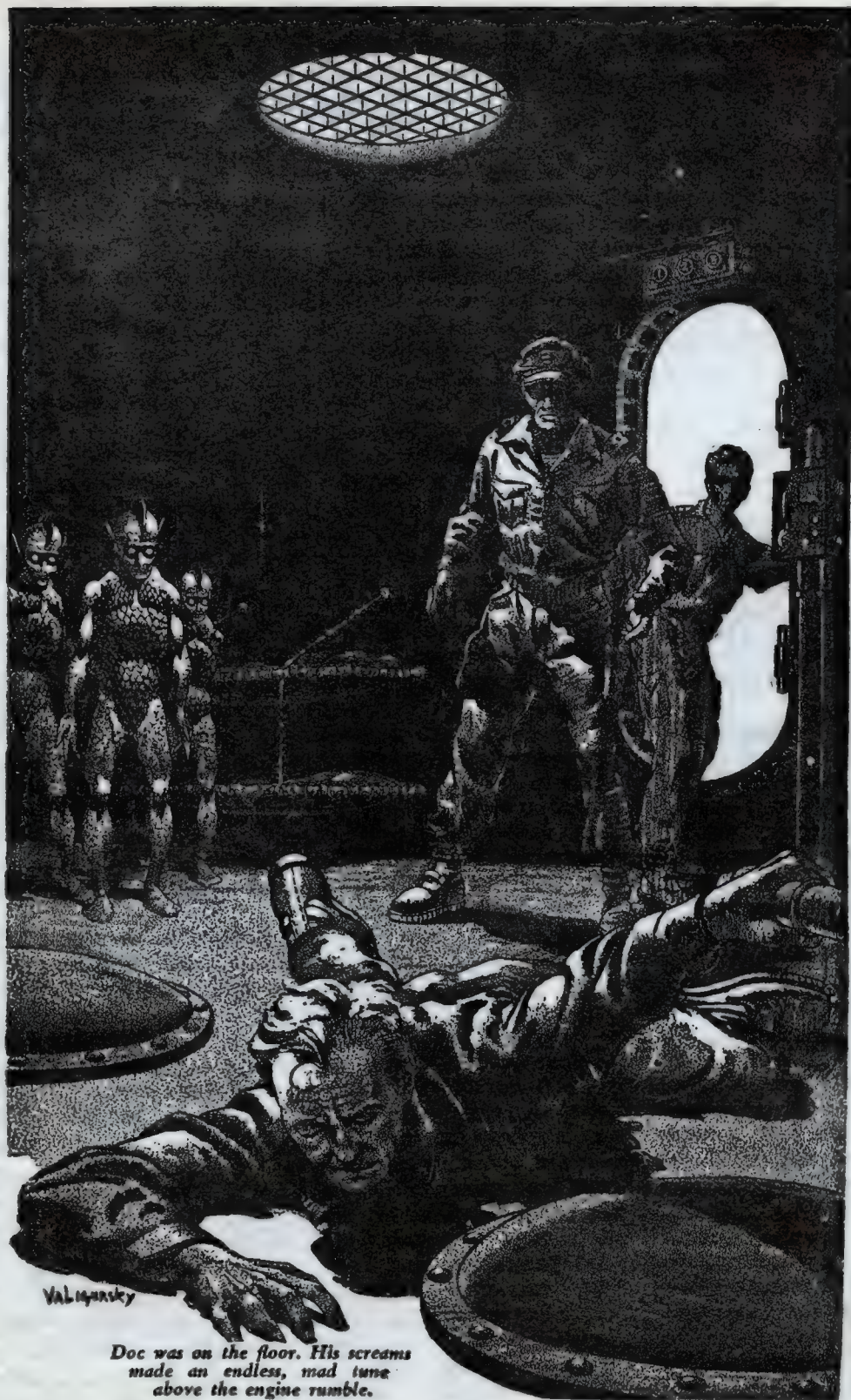
Finally he stood back, feeling the sweat running down him. He tilted his head and gulped air. "Now," he said very quietly, "now, you inhuman sonsofslate, start working . . ."

The two of them watched from the gray mats where they were crouched. Brief resentment was in their eyes.

Caffrey bunched his muscles and kicked. The android's head snapped backward against the bars. He grunted. Then both of them got up and walked over to the pulleys. They began to exercise, rapidly.

Caffrey laughed and walked on through the gym, not watching them any more. He went through the next bulkhead and spun the lock wheel, then padded down the corridor under the ceiling lights that shone like foggy blue eyes.

Dillman, his astrogator, a young kid with yellow hair and an aggressive jaw, was in



Valiquan

*Doc was on the floor. His screams
made an endless, mad tune
above the engine rumble.*

the chart room. He was working with the course computer. Dillman had been a student at the University of Venus, Cloud City, when he killed an officer of the Control Police in a fight over a girl. Dillman was good in the slave game. Dillman was getting hard.

Caffrey closed the door. It clanged loudly. Dillman looked around.

"Hello, Captain," he said. "We're right on course. Mars in six hours, fourteen minutes."

Caffrey nodded, slumping down into a thickly padded shock chair. Beyond the wide observation window, space made endless black, and stars hung there like pieces of a broken diamond. The swollen ball of the sun burned above the ship, and Mars lay scarlet, just ahead. Distant rumbling from the old corroded jet tubes filled the room.

"How's everything?" Caffrey asked. "Engines?"

"All right," Dillman said, leaning against the astrogation table. "Few pieces of stuff failed to fission awhile back, but everything's okay now."

Caffrey waved his hand. "Get out the bottle."

DILLMAN grinned and pulled open a green metal wall cabinet. He filled two tumblers with the syrupy swamp wine and handed one of the glasses to Caffrey. The captain of the ship drank half, breathed loudly, and emptied the glass.

He hunched deeper into the shock chair, resting. "I'll be glad when it's over, Dillman. Really glad."

"Do you mean that, sir?"

"Hell yes, I mean it. In this business you've got to be tough. But I'll be damned if a man can go on kicking people around all the time. Someplace, he's got to stop. Well, this trip'll make my pile and I can stop. Got a job waiting, shuttling passengers to the Temple Ruins west of Red Sands on Mars."

"This isn't any party," Dillman admitted. "Slavery's a funny thing. I thought it went out a long time back, but everybody on Earth is making such mental advances . . ." he pointed at his skull and grinned wryly ". . . that they just haven't

got any time to do any real work. And of course, these poor wastrels we've got on board aren't really human beings. How do they make them, Cap?"

Caffrey shrugged. "God knows. The Globulars on Centauri four turn them out by the hundreds. Almost as good as human beings.

They have kids, they get sick, they get mad, and they don't mind working. They don't know what else to do." He sighed, watching the circle of Mars beginning to grow big and bloated and red beyond the window. "Although it's one hell of a job to put muscle on them."

Dillman poured out some more liquor and raised his glass. His eyes were bits of hard rock. "Here's to the last trip, Cap. And I only hope the big boys of Workers, Incorporated, give me this ship."

Caffrey nodded and drank.

A green sign flashed over a bank of machinery. **END OF EXERCISE PERIOD**, it blinked, **END OF EXERCISE PERIOD**, **END OF . . .**

Rising, Caffrey walked to the machinery, pulled a large leather-handled switch. He visualized with pleasure the great doors opening, and the androids, the artificial humans, stumbling back into the dim stinking holds to wait quietly on the last stage of the trip before the chains closed on them. Caffrey laughed out loud.

"Dirty joke?" Dillman asked, faintly anxious.

"No. Just thinking about what I'll get paid. Two thousand solars. Why man, that's enough to live on for years! Plenty of wine, and an easy job, and women, bless 'em."

Dillman started to reply when the com system rattled. The big man moved to the machine and pressed the button.

"Caffrey, bridge," he growled. "What the hell is . . ."

A quiet voice cut him off, dead, precise like a small knife slicing into him. "Captain, this is Doc. I'm down in the android hold. You'd better come right away."

"Doc," Caffrey began, but the machine clicked off. He slammed it with his fists. "Doc, damn it, Doc . . ." There was only the faraway rumble of the ship's great iron heart.

He swung around, heading for the door.

"Come on," he said quickly. "Nothing's going to happen. Not on this run. Nothing..."

They ran through the halls under the blue lights, clambered down the ladders, ran through more halls.

And then they stood in front of the big black door. Caffrey turned the wheel, slowly at first, and then faster, until it spun and blurred into invisibility. He stepped back and the doors opened.

THE hold was dark and musty. In the tiers of bunks, the androids huddled like not-quite-black shadows. They said nothing.

They watched. There was only a smell of antiseptic in the air, healthful, clean and rotten all at the same time.

Caffrey and Dillman moved through the endless rows of bunks. Farther down, Caffrey could see Doc crouching over a low bunk, his cigarette lighter aflame. He knelt there, a small bulbous gnome of a man, with weary defeated eyes and thin hair lying over his skull. An android boy of about seven years lay on the bunk.

Doc looked up as they stepped up to him.

His face was filled with the weariness of his eyes, with too many years and too much that was wrong.

"Well," said Caffrey, watching him. Doc's lighter jumped and flared bright when he spoke.

"The boy is sick," Doc said. "Very sick."

Caffrey clicked his fingernails together. "Did you call me down here for that?" There was a restless stirring from the bunks.

"Certainly," Doc replied. "It might be dangerous."

"What the hell's the matter with him?"

Doc shrugged. "I don't know. How do I know what kind of diseases androids get. Don't you understand what this could mean?"

"No," said Caffrey, "I don't." His voice hardened. "I'm going back up to the chart room. We dock on Mars in a few hours."

Doc sighed and lifted his misshapen body. "All right." He turned to a woman near the bed. The woman's eyes were liquid and full of hurt. "I can't do anything."

Doc said. "I don't know what's the matter with him." Caffrey felt stupid, seeing sorrow expressed for a woman who wasn't even human. Doc snapped his lighter closed and the circle of fire was gone. Caffrey breathed easily.

"It's too damned dark," Dillman whispered as they moved toward the door. He stumbled against a bunk and swore.

"Keep quiet," Doc said very softly. "Just you keep quiet."

Caffrey closed the black door and passed out cigarettes. The smoke whirled up to the ventilators like a dancing blue dragon. "Doc," he said, trying to control his anger, "I'd like to know why you're getting so excited."

"This is the first time I've seen disease in an android," the little man replied. "I don't know whether the disease is harmful to them or not. I mean seriously harmful. But remember what Terran scarlet fever did on Antares second. We've taken care of scarlet fever. It isn't fatal to us. But remember what it did to the people on Antares second."

"Yeah," said Dillman, leaning against the wall and covering his eyes.

Caffrey remembered too; the bodies and the fine yellow buildings and the rot and the inability to stop the corruption. The system had known panic.

"I see," he said. "You think whatever's wrong with that kid, even though it might not bother them much, might . . . kill us? Is that it?"

"Yes," said Doc. He blew out some smoke.

Caffrey grabbed his arm. "Nothing's going to happen. This cargo is going to Mars and nothing's going to happen. I've worked for this a long time. Understand? No sick kid is going to keep me from landing on Mars."

"You're the captain," said Doc. He shambled off down the corridor, trailing a worm of blue smoke in the air behind him. He rounded a corner out of sight, small and gnarled and tired of arguing. The last of the smoke vanished into the ventilators.

Dillman laughed gratingly with effort. "Let's go get the rest of that bottle, Cap."

"Sure," said Caffrey.

They were three hours out from Mars

when the com system came to life again. Caffrey jumped up out of the shock chair and jabbed the switch. A nervous, excited voice came screeching at him.

"Skolnik, Captain."

"What's wrong?"

"It's Doc. He's on the floor of his cabin. He's . . . I . . ."

"Speak up, man!" Caffrey yelled.

Skolnik's voice pulled itself back from shivering pieces and went on, "Doc's lying on the floor . . . and his voice is awful . . . and the muscles in his face and arms and all over him are jumping and . . . oh, Captain . . ."

"Go on," Caffrey said savagely. "Go on!"

" . . . and he's screaming, Captain, and we can't stop him . . ."

Caffrey was out in the hall before the last syllable was uttered. The bulkheads spanged open as he kicked them. His feet slap-slapped frantically and when he was two sections away and one deck above Doc's quarters, he heard the screaming.

It rose and shrilled and howled and made him more afraid than he had ever been in his life.

The carefully acquired veneer of toughness shredded away like cheap cotton candy that was eaten at a Terran carnival and dissolved to nothing in the mouth.

The eighteen crewmen of the ship were in the hall, milling and twisting their caps in their hands. Skolnik stood with his back to the wall. He had vomited on the floor and now he was crying. Caffrey was sicker when he smelled the bitterness, but he shoved at the crewmen.

They stumbled against one another like dumb animals. Their faces belonged to little boys on dark nights when they walked home alone.

They seemed to resist Caffrey's efforts, and he clubbed at them, the breath tearing in and out of his chest. Finally, he stood with his hands on the edge of the cabin door.

HIS hands had been sweating, but now he felt, actually felt, the wave of cold sweep through his fingers, up his arms.

Doc was on the floor, like Skolnik had said.

His scream made an endless mad tune above the engine rumble. His body was lifted from the floor, jerked, twisted, thrown back down again like some fantastic, jiggling marionette on strings.

"Doc," Caffrey called, "Doc, listen, it's me, Cap."

The screaming slobbered into nothing. Doc's hands clutched at the iron frame of his bunk. They held there while the rest of his body was convulsed and pulled into insane contortions.

"Infected," Doc said, forming his words into a shriek. "I got it from the child . . . we're all infected . . . all . . . we'll infect Mars . . . spread . . . spread . . . spread . . ." The last word went up and up like the ship's takeoff siren. Doc struggled to hold onto the bed but his body went jerking away across the floor.

Dillman peered over Caffrey's shoulder. The big man spoke very softly. "Go back to my cabin. Get my gun. Hurry."

Dillman hesitated, then ran. Caffrey stood fascinated watching the devil's dance of the diseased man. Finally, something cool and hard was placed in his hand. The scream tore at his eardrums.

Quickly he looked at the ceiling. He pushed the gun forward. He pulled the trigger several times. The shots roared and blended with the engine thunder. When the noise was gone, Caffrey realized that the screaming had stopped. He dropped the gun.

He turned around and closed the door of the cabin and locked it without once looking at Doc. Skolnik still sobbed over against the wall.

Rapidly, Caffrey explained what had happened in the android hold. The men stood around, not looking at one another. They breathed loudly and the blue lights in the ceiling watched them, emotionless.

Caffrey said, "We'll all be like that after a while."

"Maybe if we beam to Mars they'll know what to do," Dillman whispered. "Maybe we can get there in time, and maybe they can stop the disease."

Caffrey looked at him. "And maybe not."

He walked away. Dillman didn't follow. He walked back to the chart room and sat down in the shock chair. Beyond the port,

Mars was large and waiting.

Caffrey thought seriously for the first time in many years. He wanted to get the ship to Mars. Maybe the doctors could help them. And maybe not.

They might infect others. The disease might spread, and if no one knew how to handle it . . . he didn't want to think about that.

Doc hadn't known what to do. Doc was a good man, medically. He had been a little run down, a little second-hand, because of his seedy deals and his need of money and his operations on women in dirty back alley rooms on a hundred worlds. But Doc couldn't stop it.

And sometime, Caffrey thought, alone and facing himself at last, a man has got to stop being tough. You can't live with yourself forever and be tough. Just once you've got to do something for your self-respect. He knew it, and all the cursing and shouting could not cover up the fact that he knew it.

There was a chance for them. But the chance might be deadly, more than deadly, to Sol's worlds. The androids didn't matter. They were pieces of metal and plastic and skin, constructed to get sick, but they didn't matter.

Caffrey laughed. *They didn't matter.* But they mattered when you thought of Doc being shaken to pieces in agony. Too perfectly made, they were. He laughed out loud at the tremendous mighty irony of the joke.

Dillman came in the door.

"What are we going to do, Captain?"

Caffrey stood up and sighed. He walked to the com system. He opened it. He spoke into it for a few moments. He shut it off. He turned to Dillman.

"That's what we're going to do," he said.

Dillman began to yell. He hit Caffrey,

pummelled at him, screamed in fear. Caffrey had to knock him down on the floor and hit him with his cane. None of the other men gave him trouble.

Carefully, he moved to the course computer.

He made corrections in the directional tape. The ship began to groan. It swung into a new course. Caffrey took one final look at Mars, thinking of the quiet days shuttling people to the Temple Ruins west of Red Sands, of the liquor and the warm, laughing women. But no more.

The sun lay dead ahead.

Caffrey sat down and poured himself a drink. Then he remembered something. If the disease hit him, he might alter the course.

He smashed the machinery, ripping it apart with his great hands, tearing it, so that the course could never be changed. Wires lay severed and bare all over the floor.

He picked up the bottle for another drink. The sun was a living ball of flame. He could not look at it.

The green sign went crazy. EXERCISE PERIOD, it blinked, EXERCISE . . .

Caffrey tried to throw the bottle at it. His hand twitched. The bottle fell to the floor and broke. Caffrey looked at his hands, at the hairs whitened with sun glow. The hand twitched again. Dillman stirred where he lay. His leg flapped once or twice.

Caffrey sat there while the heat began to melt the walls. He felt his body writhing, but it did not matter, in the heat. There was only a blinding whiteness all around. He thought about the androids. He thought about Skolnik. He thought, at last, about Mars.

He was still thinking about Mars when the ship fell into the burning maw of the sun.

Firelie Gluck fell against him suddenly and pinched him. Condeign shuddered, for he felt the planners sculpturing death out of dreams into quiet, almost joyous forms.



A Fine Day for Dying

By JOHN MARTIN

WITH a stroke of his pen, Condeign signed a death sentence on a toffish nephew and condemned an older and even more lethal bore of a brother to a swinish end. The new provisions of the will took most of what

Condeign had left in his bank balance. He sighed. There was just so much undiluted evil that one might create with just about twice the money he had signed away. He might also have written another Greater Testament, one that would have

Life could be for a whole forest of years, but dying took just as long as one wished. Condemeign reckoned he might as well do the world a bad turn while he was about it One might as well have one's little joke. The world had had one on him.

corrupted, instead of admonished. But the unconscious Villons and Des Esseintes of his world were hapless, constricted anachronisms. The universe had expanded, but, somehow, it had also fenced in common elbow room.

The other details took only another minute. The apartment would be repossessed by the housing authorities. The car would be melted down into cash to satisfy certain codicils of the wills. Odds and ends were plainly earmarked for the trash chutes, destined to wind up part of a great garbage boat hurtling into the sun, to be reduced to light and warmth.

Beyond that, he thought, ruminating on the promises of Nepenthe, Incorporated's slick paper brochure that had fallen into his hand, and barring, of course, what he was wearing at present, there was a comforting zero. Not even the mice would get that. There were no mice, no insects nor even a great variety of bacilli on the great three-mile-square cube spinning its slow orbit one hundred thousand miles beyond the limits of the atmosphere. The brochure had been more than insistent on that point. The little distractions were to vanish. Nothing was to mar the serenity or adventure of the final hours or days.

Condemeign did not bother to glance round the tidy, clean room. He took a swig of gin and picked up the telephone receiver, dialing with his free hand. When the receiver clicked and a rather corpsy female voice greeted him at the other end of the wire he spoke his name into the mouthpiece and hung up. Then he finished the gin and waited.

The man who came for him could not have been told from a thousand. His face had a slow, blurred look, as though someone had blotted it with a sponge while it was drying. His clothes were seasonal, decent and reasonably gay. Condemeign could not place him as a latter-day Charon, but then he remembered that there was an inevitable difference between the man who

takes your ticket and the navigator who swings the steel coracle out into the Styx.

The ride to the spaceport was curiously dull. Condemeign, having embarked upon oblivion, realized instantly the futility of even one final journey. A dry disappointment crinkled his tongue. He leaned forward in the aircar's seat to call a sardonic halt, but it was not even necessary for his companion to put out a restraining hand. Condemeign relaxed. His pulse had not accelerated by the slightest degree. But that could only be because he wasn't staring into black jaws as yet. Barbiturates in a bathroom in sufficient doses were simply bourgeois. The way to end, as Nepenthe promised, was on a grander scale, with the cosmos a bated spectator and the sun exploding in one's face.

They walked to the small tender. Condemeign had been curious as to when the thin sheaf of banknotes in his pocket was expected to change hands. His guide halted at the flight of steel steps and squinted a little at the sun that drenched the spaceport. His eyes caught on the tall needle of an interplanetary freighter and then he looked at Condemeign.

"There is a little matter of the money," he said.

"Better count 'it," Condemeign said. "Twenty-five thousand in large bills. And if you think I went to all the bother of having the serials copied, it is because you fail to understand the thoughts of a man quite eager to die."

The blurred features came into sharp focus like a viewplate clearing. It was Charon, now, counting the bills rapidly.

"It is true that not all the final reports have been examined by our psychological department, Mr. Condemeign," he said. "But you wouldn't have gotten even this far if you had been found grossly wanting." He put the bills away and waved a hand gracefully at the great billiard table of the spaceport, the bulking, far-off mountains and the quiet sky. "It is a beautiful day,

Mr. Condemeign. Perhaps you had better take a last look around."

"I did," Condemeign sighed. "Last night. And it wasn't any fun at all." He climbed aboard the tender. When he and his guide had gotten into their straps there was a faint hiss and the bright airport began to drop away quickly.

THE sense of strangling boredom never left him. Not even when the great corona flared out of the paling blue and pulsed through the border between earth and sky. He had never seen it before, and his absolute ennui confirmed his decision. From the tangled roots of the flower to the last Einsteinian closed curve there was dull sameness in the universe. If there was a god it was only because he had never heard of Nepenthe, Inc.

Then the multi-miled palace of death swam sluggishly into view, a fat, tin-colored cookie can, with thousands of blind eyes.

The pilot who sat abstemiously on the edge of his seat threw a bunch of fingers at the cookie can. He was a short, pulpy man with eyes that looked as though they had seen stars topple and blinked for the dryness.

"Never seen anything like that hanging in the sky, did you?" he asked.

Condemeign frowned. He edged an eye toward the sun, gaudy in its necklace of gas and stars.

"What about the moon?" he said. "What about half of that thing with its guts coming out?"

The guide smiled gently.

"Quite impossible, Mr. Condemeign. Nepenthe is surrounded by a force screen that could deflect a planet."

Condemeign brooded.

"With that sort of invulnerability, someone might . . ."

"Someone tried. And after that, even the sun wouldn't have him. He's poking out around the Andromeda nebula, now, quite helpless, of course. He can't turn the power off. Not in his lifetime, anyway."

A wide mouth gaped in the now faintly visible force screen through which an ordinary blue light ray pulsed, serving as a beam, and the tender turned slowly, point-

ing its narrow nose at the welcoming maw.

Condemeign watched the pilot make small, hushed motions at the instrument. When he looked up again the airlock had closed behind them and a wiry steel claw reached out to wrap the tender in its cradle.

He had half expected to see a winding line of neophytes clad in robes of white writhing somewhere into a leafy nothingness with a mist-driven tempo, perhaps from Debussy to waft them on to their *Dies Irae*. An attendant helped him descend into the square steel room. His guide paused and looked about, floating.

"A trifle businesslike and grim," he noted. "Inside there's gravity laid on, good atmosphere. Nothing like this hot steel smell. And you can walk. Excellent footing. Just like home."

They passed, mainly by violent swimming motions into a large hall. Condemeign fell jerkily back on his feet, coming instantly again to grips with the pull of gravity. Everything was steel walls fussily disguised with a sort of furry, plastic lining laid on in thin sheets. The guide walked him up to a desk against one wall, near a door. Condemeign blinked at the soft blue illumination. The guide shook his hand.

"I must be going," he said. "Glad to have met you, Mr. Condemeign."

The guide's hunched back faded through the door. Condemeign turned listlessly to the figure at the desk. It was a woman, and before his eyes focussed in the filmy light he got an odd impression of a brown, papery bundle incongruous in its *chiaroscuro* lacings and bulgings.

"I am Miss Froom," she said. The smile that lit her face had last been seen on Madame La Farge. It had cut its teeth on sad suttees. It was thoroughly unoriginal.

Condemeign sighed. The perfect servant. The timeless, obsequious recorder. Was Miss Froom, perhaps, the key to the last portal. She was distressingly unattractive, rather flat in the chest and sported an overly aseptic set of teeth that flashed. He noted the brown laths of legs that poked from under the denim shorts. Miss Froom, he decided, looked really like an underdone chicken.

Miss Froom rustled the papers before her. She tapped, almost frigidly, on the glassy,

top of the desk.

"There are a few questions, Mr. Conde-meign."

"Whose questions?"

Miss Froom clucked.

"Ours first, and then, if you wish, a few of yours."

Conde-meign sighed and then he almost smiled. It would be a blind of course, a subtle blind to confuse and reassure him. But then, weren't the blind always getting kicked. Wasn't someone always dropping lead nickels into the cups?

"The brochure mentioned nothing about questions, Miss Froom." He said.

"We do not insist upon it, Mr. Conde-meign. You may answer the questions or not. Nepenthe, Inc., as you already know, has investigated your case. These are linking questions, Mr. Conde-meign. They may be of use to science."

So the almighty dollar had feet of clay. Even in space, between earth and moon, beyond the one hundred thousand mile limit where the state power ended and anarchy began, despite the insulation of distance and depth, quite coldly independent of even the mighty barriers of self, science was poking and treading about, listening and noting and breathing down his neck. Well, what of it, he thought, finally. Life was ceaseless obligation. He was beginning to realize that death might be the same.

"Have you ever wanted to die before, Mr. Conde-meign?" Miss Froom seemed almost penetratingly aware of the verdict in his eyes.

"Often, Miss Froom." He lit a cigarette and watched her making the first notations with a pencil. "It is only in late years, however, that I have been able to afford it."

Miss Froom almost blushed. When she recovered she said: "Are you afraid of death, Mr. Conde-meign?"

"I hope so, Miss Froom. Like a certain Cardinal of Ragusa—you have probably never heard of him—I am inclined to put a high price on existence before it ceases." He paused and settled on the edge of the desk, musing. "Yes, I rather hope so. There is little else to be afraid of." He watched her through the smoke of his cigarette, blinking, a wet stain of puny resentment

and annoyance on the blotched beak. She hesitated for an instant, but the flying fingers never stopped.

"Would you care to disclose the reason you wish to die?" she asked.

Let science in for one final peek, a last eyebrow lifting look at the raised chemise. Why not? Even science might be persuaded that life was unrecognizable from death except in the shifting phantasm and utterly real land of sleep. He drew a deep breath.

"I think so, Miss Froom. It is, simply, that there is no meaning to life, no meaning at all. I think this particular view is disguised under a number of well-known philosophic terms and bodies of thought. One might call it a sort of nihilistic Existentialism, to be more concrete and specific. However," he paused and smiled charmingly and with just a touch of sadness in his eyes, "I would not call myself an Existentialist by any means. That sort of person playing Russian Roulette, for instance, cannot help but manifest an interest in his chances for life. He clings, so to speak, to even a tiny thread that ravel enticingly from the million-threaded rope of ordinary existence. Now, I"—Conde-meign watched his left leg go back and forth in a short arc—"I do not see the thread, though I know it is there as I know the rope is there. Both a thread and a rope can hang a man. In fact, in this case, they have."

HE WATCHED her, hoping for one flicker of interest, one sign that he had said something original, for, beyond doubt, she was the supreme critic, an unfailing reflection of all the prejudices that Nepenthe had compassed, and even more. There was only the flayed blankness of a blind wall in her eyes. He rocked, suddenly, seeming to see great carved doors shutting him out, shoving him into the remotest corner of a vibrant oblivion. Then, as it always had, silent Homeric laughter saved him. He was an honest Cagliostro after all, an albuminous series of endless, mystical passes that could never pretend to be anything more than motion. Next question he thought. But none came, and then he said, suddenly, "Is it painful, Miss Froom?"

Miss Froom did not bother to smile with

all the prejudices of a woman of the world. Her eyes glittered dully like a toad's and he perceived in their depths the first awakening to him as something more than a client, a case, a filing card to be abstracted. Miss Froom's voice, he discovered suddenly, had more in it than the pride of neon and the inexorable drive of continuity.

"It is never painful, Mr. Condemeign." She hesitated and then went on. "It is sometimes interesting and often dramatic, but," and she cracked the roast-brown crust of her face with a corpse smile, "I think we can safely say it is never painful. If—ah—oblivion were painful, we should have no clients at all."

Done to a turn, he thought, and then a small man with a hint of Mephistophelian humor glinting in his eyes and spraying off from the sharpness of his chin, came in through the door by which his guide had departed. He was smoking an oval cigarette and Miss Froom jumped to her feet and filed Mr. Condemeign's papers in a wall recess before she said anything.

"This is Mr. Condemeign, Dr. Munro," she said, turning to press a few buttons, and Condemeign knew he had come to the end of the line.

"I am the Director of Nepenthe, Mr. Condemeign." Dr. Munro extended a small, brown hand and Condemeign took it absently. "You have found our establishment comfortable so far?" Condemeign nodded. Dr. Munro turned to Miss Froom and said, "You may go, Miss Froom. It will be over an hour before the next arrival."

"Very well, Doctor," she said and glanced up rather shyly before she left. "You will find Mr. Condemeign interesting, I think."

"I rather thought so," the doctor said. "Yes, I rather thought so." He nudged Condemeign with a slight pressure of his eyes down a short passageway and presently they came out into a small domed room through which the stars peered brightly. Dr. Munro indicated a comfortable chair and seated himself after Condemeign.

"I could not help hearing your last question, Mr. Condemeign," the Doctor said. "And I can assure you that Miss Froom answered correctly. We do not accept neu-

rotics or certifiable psychotics on Nepenthe." Doctor Munro's eyes fixed Condemeign's with a stare of almost unbearable morality. "We are not Torquemadas, sir, nor Satanists, pandering to the perverted tastes of common debauchees. You will find no connoisseurs of pain and anxiety among our—ah—staff, though if one is ever required, I am sure that I myself could pass muster . . ." Doctor Munro's eyes sharpened suddenly and a long purl of smoke went raging past his lips. "Though, of course," he said hurriedly, "The occasion has arisen only twice before. Both times in the case of an extremely clever penetration of our screening system by agents of Bios. They regretted it, of course, rather screamingly, as I remember."

"Bios?" Condemeign's eyebrows raised themselves the merest part of an inch.

Dr. Munro laughed unpleasantly. He plucked at the latex lining of his chair with quick, wrenching motions.

"Bios, Mr. Condemeign, is an organization of fanatical, reactionary crackpots, clouduckcoolanders and philosophical maunders who derive their ideas from the old Hindus, holding that the taking of life for whatever reason and in whatsoever fashion is a sin against the prime law of the universe—so they call it—which is that life is destined to animate all inanimate matter. They have an abhorrence of the latter which extends to such absurdities as claiming that the planets themselves are living creatures to absolve themselves of the horror of even walking on inactive materials."

"I should imagine that the Biosonians would have some difficulty reconciling themselves to clothes," remarked Condemeign dryly.

Dr. Munro chuckled, rubbing his hands.

"You are perspicacious, Mr. Condemeign. They are, of course, invariably arrested when they appear on the streets, for they go naked. That is the least of their depredations, however."

"There are others, more serious?"

Dr. Munro leaned back in his chair and lit the fourth or fifth oval cigarette he had begun since meeting Condemeign.

"They recognize Nepenthe, of course, as the prime obstacle to what they consider their main objective—the preservation and

extension of life." Doctor Munro's voice rose abruptly in annoyance. He brought his fingers together, steepled, in what almost sounded like a violent snap. "Mind you, wars may drench Earth and the other planets in blood. Their contribution to the various peace funds are non-existent. Disease and the various corruptions of mind and soul annihilate millions. One would imagine that this absurd organization would devote its cloak and dagger activities to wiping out such horrors, in raising the standard of living, in forcing the various state powers to abolish poverty. But no! No, Mr. Condemeign! This insane group of malefactors . . ." Dr. Munro's palate clacked in the back of his mouth with indignation . . . "This outrageous conspiracy against one of the most sacred rights of life itself, which is, of course, to end it, can find nothing better to do than interfere with a business which, though not legitimate in the legal sense of the word, serves a purpose nobler than most and certainly more artistic."

"They are really dangerous people, then?" Condemeign asked.

"**F**ANATICS, sir, are seldom anything else. It is the sworn purpose of Bios, frequently communicated to us in raffish notes and wax-sealed manifestos delivered to us in numerous antediluvian manners, to destroy Nepenthe."

"Rather Jesuitical," rejoined Condemeign. "In fact, hardly worth the trouble."

Dr. Munro fussed. He peered out into the star-lit heavens nervously. "They cannot, of course, possibly penetrate our force screens. But men are more insidious than pointed projectiles. In fact . . ." He turned his face to Condemeign's. "In fact . . ."

"You are rather wondering if I might not myself have waggled in an atom bomb; that I am, myself, a Biosonian fanatic," said Condemeign. He accepted a cigarette from Munro who leaned forward, his flashing little eyes fastened on Condemeign's face.

"Not at all, Mr. Condemeign," Dr. Munro's lips parted in a smile. "We can never be too sure about anything, you know, and it is possible, ultimately inevitable, that Bios could successfully smuggle an agent or agents past our screening." His voice dropped to a confidential level, and Conde-

meign thought it might also be appealing. "I myself would not wish to be present when that interesting event takes place. I'm just wondering, Mr. Condemeign, whether or not you really are a fanatic." A flutter, almost frightened look crept into Dr. Munro's eyes. "We are quite used to death on Nepenthe, and yet, somehow, it never seems to lose its novelties or its terrors."

"I'm afraid I'm not a fanatic, Dr. Munro, nor an adherent of Bios."

The Doctor's eyes grew sadder.

"Somehow, I wish you were a fanatic, Mr. Condemeign. A fanatic about something."

"Why?"

"Because a fanatic is far from being the most dangerous person in the world." Dr. Munro's pointed chin quivered.

"And just what kind of person is, Dr. Munro?"

The Doctor rose, stubbing out his cigarette. "I think—I think . . ." he said slowly, "that every man is entitled to a few professional secrets. And that fact is one of mine." His voice became explosive. "Come, come, Mr. Condemeign, surely you have a better question than that. One usually does."

Condemeign smiled. He had, of course. The obvious one. The last surrender to the delicious, trivial preoccupation with the ordinaries. The already flagellant skin eager for roughening against the last bark edges of the grain. He saw himself, just once more, not abject at the foot of the cross, but smiling into the wide bore of a pregnant pistol. And a tiny chill shot through him, small, diffuse, but cold as the black spaces beyond the dome.

"I really would like to know if the manner of my departure has already been arranged."

Dr. Munro measured him with a professional eye. To Condemeign it seemed as though invisible tapes were recording his dimensions, that hammers and saws were already building a coffin. But there would be no coffin, he knew. There hadn't been for hundreds of years.

"I rather think, so, Mr. Condemeign," the Doctor remarked. "As you know—as Miss Froon told you—all of the reports have not been fully checked, but they are, most likely on my desk now. Of course, I

can't show them to you. We take special pains to . . ."

"I quite realize that," said Condemeign, satisfied. "Of course, I hope that your staff has devised a suitable end."

Dr. Munro slithered close to Condemeign. He expanded. Whole ideologies, entire universes of bulked emotion framed in his eyes.

"The best staff in the System, sir! You may be sure of it!" His voice sank as it indicated scorn. "Nepenthe is worlds ahead of any of its competitors. In fact, I might even say that Bios disdains to notice any service agency of our sort except Nepenthe. Here we have the greatest body of experts on their specialty ever gathered together under one roof. Nepenthe has spared no expense to insure that taste, variety and ingenuity surround every client on his way to the final goal. You will not be surprised, Mr. Condemeign, when I tell you that literally hundreds upon hundreds of man-hours are consumed in the devising of an individual death, with as much care lavished on those of more moderate income as upon those who could afford it several times over. A staff of forty-three experts! Imagine!"

Dr. Munro's fingers rang, snapping in the air. A sort of glow haloed his chattering face. "And every one of them an artist, a dreamer, a virtuoso in his special subdivision of the field! Every man and woman of the team selected from prepared lists. And then, Mr. Condemeign, to accommodate this great body of talent thousands upon thousands of acres of halls, corridors, playrooms, an infinitude of stages on which their immense dramas or comedies—it is important to remember that death can be a comedy—are contrived, controlled and brought to a denouement!"

Condemeign chuckled grimly.

"Just where is the body delivered, Dr. Munro?" It would not be an Irish wake, he thought, with keening over the body, and a hearty toast to the departed, rosy-cheeked and a-squat in the bier.

Dr. Munro, checked, gathered in the remnants of his dignity with a wave of his fingers.

"There is no 'body' left, Mr. Condemeign," he said. "What is left is discreetly

disposed of in our private crematorium, and a death certificate is secretly deposited in its proper place in the local Hall of Records . . . eh?" The Doctor started methodically and nervously as a uniformed attendant stepped from behind a hanging. "Eh, what is it?"

"Case 27, Doctor." The man looking significantly at Condemeign.

"Oh, go ahead," Munro said petulantly. "It's all right."

"Case 27 is closed, Dr. Munro."

Condemeign blinked his eyes.

"You know, Doctor Munro, I appreciate your interest in me. I rather imagine that you don't draw the curtains this far for everybody."

"Not for everybody, Mr. Condemeign," the Doctor said. "For you, why not? It is not that you are interesting, Mr. Condemeign. It is, frankly, that you are not a fanatic." He bowed gracefully.

"I'm afraid you will have to pardon me, Mr. Condemeign," the Doctor continued. "I must report to my office. In the meantime, Sismus, here, will show you to your room. You needn't bother too much about him. He will merely be around to make the beds, help you dress and perform any other little services you may desire. It is all in the brochure. Consider Nepenthe at your disposal."

SISMUS plucked at Condemeign's arm as the Doctor disappeared. They walked through several interconnecting corridors, got into a gravity tube and emerged, according to Sismus, on the other side of Nepenthe, in an identical arrangement of passageways that reminded Condemeign of the corridors of an ordinary space liner, opening out into staterooms. His own room was little more than an over-sized cell, furnished with a plain bed, a deep over-stuffed chair and several highboys. Condemeign immediately inspected them. They were jammed full of bright-colored lounging pajamas, the customary costume of clients of the firm. Sismus helped him disrobe and put on a pair. Condemeign watched his clothes swept into a disposal chute and replaced the wristwatch on his arm.

The attendant indicated an aperture in the wall beside the disposal chute which seemed to perform most of the duties of a

dumbwaiter. A muddy-colored pair of socks fell through the aperture at the touch of a button, as did a tall drink of gin-and-sugar.

"Your meals are served in the same way, sir," remarked Sismus, as a small red light blinked and a bit of paper wafted in. "This is the menu for the next meal." He handed the paper to Condemeign. "You need only check off the items you wish and simply throw the paper back in the slot."

Condemeign studied the really fine bill of fare. So they had abolished days and time and the whole anachronism of boxing and correlating. The sense of passage was to be dulled, and a fine, chaotic unconcern inoculated, like a diffuse spray of forgetfulness coursing through the body.

"The advantages of Nepenthe are overwhelming, Sismus," remarked Condemeign, sipping his drink. "I am surprised that it is not run purely as a hotel."

"Television is also laid on, sir," interrupted Sismus. "You may select any live or recorded program you wish." He took a metal-covered book from a shelf and handed it to Condemeign.

Condemeign flipped the pages. His eyes widened. He whistled, muttering.

"What's this . . . 'The Perfumed Garden', 'Arabian Night', 'Fanny Hill'?" He paused, breathless. Sismus was unconcerned.

"Nothing but the best of classic pornography, sir. You needn't worry. We are outside of all the legal limits here. Will there be anything else, Mr. Condemeign?"

"You can go, Sismus. Yes, thank you." The attendant, leaving, handed him a guide to Nepenthe. "I'll manage, though the place is a bit complicated." He gazed pointedly at the door and Sismus went away.

Over a second drink he examined the guide. Nepenthe, he decided, was utterly fabulous. The rise and fall of several nations might take place in only half the space. He selected a rococo dining hall, shaved at the small sink and found where he wanted to go without any difficulty at all.

There was no roof, nor a rounded dome. He sat at a small table in the dining hall and dined with the silvery pinpoints passing overhead very slowly as the cube tumbled end over end in its swift orbit. The meal was sumptuous; a rasher of truffles

dipped in goose butter and eked out with an excellent and deathly dry champagne. He drank a lot of the champagne and about an hour later it went to his head with the last of the magnum. Two and a half quarters is a lot of champagne to drink he mused, getting to his feet, and he wouldn't have missed a drop of it. The novelty of not having to pay a bill took his fancy and he filled up with a few fancy cigars at a dispensing machine and then dropped in at a solidographic playing of a new version of Hamlet.

Leaving the theater with a jaded eye some hours later, he bumped into a tipsy young man dressed in bright yellow pajamas who seemed to be falling in the general direction of a large party being given in one of the great ballrooms. The atmosphere became distinctly Louis Quatorze as they passed under the curving archway and through a few drapes.

"Very interesting and doubtless enjoyable," Condemeign said, and glanced at his wristwatch. "But I am afraid . . ."

The young man who was fair-haired and had a long, dissipated face that verged on the degenerate, smirked.

"Nonsense, you have plenty of time. There's always plenty of time on Nepenthe. You can't let yourself think any other way."

Condemeign pulled away gently, but the other seized him by the arm.

"Look here," he said, and grinned foolishly. "You might as well stay here. How do you know all this isn't part of your particular exit?" He glanced swiftly around and pointed. "See, there and there. Belted and sworded. Maybe they're intended to pick a quarrel with you. Personally I'd hate to go that way. It's heroic, but I just can't stand the touch of cold steel." He reeled a little and Condemeign put out a steadying hand. "Thanks, old chap. I didn't realize I'd had a bit too much."

SOME revelers tore by, scattering bits of streamers and winy breaths. A cold breeze blew suddenly through one of the ventilators and Condemeign, half-carrying the other, went rigid. Death seemed at his elbow, jerking and pulling and being mulishly obstinate about staying. Death? His spine abruptly became a rod of ice. Where

did it lie for him? In that shiny door knob, quivering in immobility under the flourescents with frying voltage?

Was it a frozen Borgia smirk on some papier mache mask? Or did it leer at him from the folds of a tunic that was visibly unable to perform its office of hiding a pair of magnificent breasts? The weight in his arms grew leaden. Could death, he thought, be approaching, lanced and ready-levelled in the fine black eyes of the old man who was approaching, tottering and rubbing his aged hands together. The ancient wreck passed and Condemeign suddenly felt he could breathe.

A girl came striding out of a giggling group. She paused as Condemeign got in her way, hefting his charge to a nearby chair.

"When did it happen?" she asked. Her gray eyes widened.

"Happen? When did what happen?"

She reached out a hand and drew it back, while the body of the young man shuddered convulsively and one of Condemeign's supporting hands ran suddenly red with blood. Then he saw the dagger in her hand and his teeth chattered. The body clumped to the floor.

"Don't be so upset," the girl said. "It's probably the way he was intended to go anyway."

"But they said it wouldn't be painful!" he protested.

She was very pretty, with a high-built head of red hair, a rather good nose and pale cheeks. She smiled.

"I think it usually isn't," she said. "But one thing they don't tell you is that anything really goes. There are no laws against murder on Nepenthe, or against anything else. If you happen to get in the way of someone who doesn't like you before the death department has a chance to arrange their histrionics, the front office calls it cricket."

"I suppose . . . I suppose," began Condemeign, wiping his sweaty forehead with the sleeve of his pajamas, "that the death department never wastes a good set-up." He stepped back as a couple of attendants came out of a corner, finally, and took the body away. A few interested revelers went back to their carousing.

"I haven't been here long enough to find out," the girl said. "But those boys and girls are high-priced talent. And Doctor Munro is a cagy sort. He probably has the first penny he ever made in his counterfeiting machine as a boy." She paused, watching Condemeign's face flicker from white to pink and back again. "Wait here a minute," she said, and then came back with a beaker of something alcoholic and highly refreshing.

"I'm Firelie Gluck," she remarked, following the convulsions of his Adam's apple as he drained the glass.

He tossed the beaker onto a pile of dead streamers and stood up.

"I'd like to know how he was killed without my knowing it," he said.

"Somebody probably slipped that dirk into him when you weren't looking. You know, like this . . ." She fell against him suddenly and pinched his ribs. Then she recovered, laughing. Condemeign shuddered. In the thin, sharp shock of her fingers he felt the planners sculpturing death out of dreams into quiet, almost joyous forms. Suddenly he seized her hands and examined the fingers while she smiled up into his face. Then he sighed with relief. There was no poison ring, no barbed, dripping hypodermic crawling its point with icy death. Her nails were clean, unpainted. He tore at her wrists and she giggled, writhing in his grasp, and there was nothing there, up to the elbow, but smooth, pink skin.

"Firelie Gluck," he whispered, and laughed. "I heard a name once before like that, at a circus."

"Was she pretty?"

Condemeign stared at the hands of an old grandfather's clock across the great room.

"She was the bearded lady," he said. He walked away from her, thumbing his guide to Nepenthe. He hoped the drink she'd given him wasn't a watery passport to hell, for a while at least.

The guide advertised an excursion service on the outer skin of the great cube. He'd known about this, of course, but now he also knew how to reach it. The trip consumed a few gravity lifts, a turn or two in branching corridors and ended in an airlock attached to a luxurious bar. He had a

Manhattan or two while an attendant fitted a spacesuit on him.

"You're sure you're not subject to giddiness, sir? If you are, I wouldn't advise shutting off the magnetic shoes. The bulk of the structure will keep you from flying away too far, but . . ."

"It will be quite all right," Condemeign said. He drained the last glass and let the attendant help him to the airlock opening.

"The oxygen cartridge lasts just an hour, sir, remember that," the attendant said.

Condemeign smiled. For him it might last two minutes. But the clock over the bar told him that even with that, and given a few more minutes of slow, numbing asphyxiation, he'd be able to do the job he'd come to Nepenthe to do. In fact, if they weren't too fussy about picking up bodies before the oxygen cylinder exhausted itself, he could do the job dead as well as alive.

The door closed behind him and then a great glass wheel in front of him opened and there was a little, abrupt snowfall as the air in the chamber condensed into crystal. He inched forward to the edge of the cube and pulled himself out on the surface.

ABOVE and behind him, the sun blazed hot and silent in the crawling sky. He watched the slow revolution of the heavens above him, fascinated, for a moment, stared as the great ball of the earth jumped over the far boundary of the great metal field and began climbing up, dragging its moon. He staggered. The flat side of the three mile cube seemed to wobble and he realized that the attendant's warning had been far from overcautious. A man might go mad out in this absolute silence, bounded now by nothing but the great black wall of the universe and its billions of pinholes. He closed his eyes, listening to the tick of his wristwatch and then opened them suddenly, as he realized that the watch was gone.

He remembered how close she'd been, how neatly she'd fallen against him, pinching him with one hand, while, with the other she slipped the simple catch of the watchband and palmed it. And he'd never noticed.

Firelie Gluck. He laughed.

Ironically he saluted the climbing blue globe of the Earth. They would wait an-

other time now, another try. But he would not sacrifice his own money. He had spent \$25,000 for a job well done, and, of course, the only way to do it right was to do it himself.

The glass of the faceplate was too thick for even a steel-mailed fist to smash. Condemeign walked to a garbage disposal tube that projected a few feet out off the level surface of the cube side. The champagne and the other drink were wearing off. The steel plates bucked under his feet and he knew that in another minute he'd be retching, with the majestic background for a perfectly dramatic exit cut off by a spew of vomit. Kneeling, he brought the faceplate of the helmet down with a sharp crack on the steel projection. The glass shattered with a gay burst and just for a second he heard the awful silence of the imponderable ether.

In Dr. Munro's office, Firelie Gluck handed him Condemeign's wristwatch. Munro grunted.

"You have been very useful, Miss Gluck," he said. "You are a most intelligent and perspicacious woman." He tossed the wristwatch to the desk top and watched it with fascination while his lips moved. "You won't reconsider your decision?"

Firelie lit a cigarette with slow animation.

"I don't think so, Doctor. When I came to Nepenthe I had every intention of seeing it through. I was not only bored with life, but I had something of the same point of view that Mr. Condemeign professed."

"Yes, I know. That's why we used you. But there is more to it than that."

Firelie fastened her eyes on the watch.

"Thank goodness there is. Just one step further, in fact. And once you take that, even the meaningless becomes worth the effort."

"I—I don't suppose you would care to reveal exactly what you mean," the Doctor asked, hesitatingly.

"Not unless you want to refund more than my original down payment. Say a million dollars more."

Dr. Munro chuckled dryly.

"Your price will come down, Miss Gluck. We'll get in touch with you on the question when it does. Naturally, you'll have to

guarantee not to reveal it to anyone else, otherwise we might be tempted to give you a free treatment here."

Firelie Gluck said nothing, but her eyes laughed grimly.

A buzzer sounded beneath the desk. Dr. Munro clicked a switch and transferred his oval cigarette to the other hand.

"Yes?"

"This is Miss Froom," Miss Froom's voice, though a trifle reedy, was pregnant with import. "I have something to report, Dr. Munro—on Mr. Condemeign's case. Number 32."

The Doctor relaxed in his chair. A flicker of interest tinged with bored annoyance crossed his face.

"Go ahead, Miss Froom."

There was a mechanical squawk from the instrument and then it cleared and Miss Froom began. She seemed happiest now. When she finished, Dr. Munro blew a long stream of smoke toward Firelie Gluck and tapped his cigarette case. Miss Gluck lit up, settling back with a smug air of being on the inside for the first time. It was not the least reason why she had been willing to cooperate.

"Oh?" Dr. Munro's voice was tainted with sincere remorse. "I am sorry to hear of it. Mr. Condemeign, of course. Was the end painful?"

Firelie turned her ears toward the blind receiver with some interest.

"I don't think so, Doctor," Miss Froom said. "Mr. Condemeign perished of ordinary asphyxiation. He had apparently smashed the faceplate of his helmet."

"Yes, yes, we can't have them dying like that." Dr. Munro looked at Firelie Gluck and he winked.

There was a pause and then the mechanical voice went on:

"Isn't— isn't that rather expected, Dr. Munro, in any case? On Nepenthe, I mean?"

The Doctor closed his eyes and then opened them wearily.

"We won't go into it, Miss Froom, but I would advise you to make a note of the entire reports on this case and study them, say in three years time when you graduate to the psychological department. But I will give you a hint now on which you may ruminate. Mr. Condemeign was not only

unworthy of our services but he almost caused the total annihilation of Nepenthe."

He heard a restrained clucking and he knew that the chicken skin had gone white. Within a reasonable time, something else would be green.

"That's right, Miss Froom. You will immediately see the value of attention of minute detail. You have undoubtedly very often wondered whether or not you couldn't handle my job as well. In my opinion, Miss Froom, you will be ready when you notice *all* the details."

He clicked his teeth against a very long cigarette holder, waiting, while Miss Froom crowded herself down. There was a hesitant clearing of the metal throat and then:

"Have you any instructions for the disposal of the body, Dr. Munro?"

The Doctor made a small notation on a pad.

"I think it would be appropriate," he said finally, "if Mr. Condemeign were found drowned and heavily bruised about the body at some beach or other in his own city. Make the usual arrangements and . . . Yes, Miss Froom—refund the \$25,000 to Mr. Condemeign's personal account. No doubt we shall see it again when his heirs have gotten somewhat beyond their capacities."

The click of the switch on the other end of the wire was deafening.

Firelie Gluck closed one eye.

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell me just what it's all about?"

"I'd be glad to, Miss Gluck, if . . ." And Dr. Munro paused significantly, poring over her as he would a colored relief map.

Miss Gluck didn't hesitate. She crossed one leg over the other and smiled.

"Any time you say, Doctor. I'm about ready to graduate anyway."

Dr. Munro settled back in his chair. He pressed a button and a fuzzy-lined steel wheel rolled back on its gymbals and let them look out on the framed earth and moon.

"You can keep a loose tongue on anything I tell you, Firelie, because Nepenthe is only too anxious to let Bios know that we trumped their ace again. I'd suggest Munson of International News. He's pretty

good at Sunday supplements and ghostly little television fillers. But don't quote me. If you do, you'll find yourself in the middle of an Egyptian passion play, or maybe Inca—I forget which culture the death department recommended for you. Anyway, you'll be the chief victim." He paused, leaned forward to pat her hand which lay vibrant on one of the arms of her chair and resumed, after she nodded softly in complete understanding.

He pointed to the watch.

"Condemeign never thought we'd examine his wristwatch of course. Very probably he knew very little about our precautions. After all, the only two other Bios agents we caught never got back. X-rays taken in the tender that brought him to Nepenthe showed an intricate mechanism concealed in the stem head. It warranted investigation, because that was all he had on him that could cut ice. Nothing concealed in his clothes or in various bodily orifices—you'll pardon my frankness, of course."

"No offense," she said. "What's dangerous about a watch stem?"

"Bios couldn't bring an atom bomb aboard in any case. They couldn't bring it inside, so they decided to work on an outside job."

"Second-story stuff?"

Dr. Munro watched the rim of the moon follow its mistress down the solid curve of the window well. His eyes were still frightened, still shaken by the forgotten memory of utter annihilation.

"In the little watch stem was a most ingenious device, a device for polarizing two pieces of atom-bomb explosive that had been fired from diametrically opposite directions at Nepenthe. Their velocity, of course was extreme, more than sufficient to enable them to reach the proximity point of critical mass once their courses were brought into alignment."

Dr. Munro let a heavy glass ash tray drop on Condemeign's watch. The stem wheel with its axle fell out and rolled, flattened and broken on the desk top. He swept the debris together and tossed it into a disposal chute.

"That was supposed to correlate the

courses of the two oncoming, opposing containers, each of which was able to correct its direction when it received the proper signal from the watch stem." The Doctor sighed. "Thank heaven, neither of them did. Condemeign would have had to work it from outside Nepenthe—our power plants tended to blank out the radio signal—and he couldn't, of course."

"You mean those two components were supposed to reach critical mass just over Nepenthe?"

The Doctor whistled softly.

"I hardly think it would have blown us entirely to flinders, but undoubtedly we would have gone out of business."

MISS GLUCK rose and went to the round window well.

"But I still don't understand about Condemeign. You said he wasn't a fraud at all."

Dr. Munro plucked at her hand. He hardly seemed to be concentrating on what he was saying. He had eyes for other things.

"No, he wasn't a fraud. He was a member of Bios and he really wanted to die, and that's why they sent him."

Miss Gluck uttered a low moan. It was not a moan of pain.

The Doctor continued.

"The watch stem was conclusive, of course. But we were curious. We collect data, you know. We aren't entirely a cube for coining money. That question about his reason for dying. He was a nihilist, a man to whom nothing means anything, or who thinks it doesn't. Of course something always does. And the thing that did was his loyalty to Bios."

Miss Gluck managed to speak. She was unquestionably a woman thirsty for knowledge above all else. Her voice was a voice in a dream.

"Yes, I was curious about that. His loyalty to Bios, despite the fact that he wanted to die."

Dr. Munro didn't answer for about fourteen seconds. Then he did.

"He just thought he was a nihilist. But the last thing he had to do was a job for Bios and that was going to be his last joke on everything, you, me, Nepenthe. Of course he didn't care for anything—and of course he cared for something. Everyone

does so long as they're alive. Otherwise, why bother to even die?"

Firelie Gluck said nothing in reply to that. But after a minute the Doctor said:

"Of course he had to tell the truth because he thought nothing meant anything at all. That's why Miss Froom asked him those questions I wrote out. What's that, Firelie? *Who cares about Miss Froom?*"

And then for about twenty minutes neither of them strictly speaking, said anything.

Later, when Miss Gluck had gone off to the waiting tender, the Doctor watched it blast off toward Earth. He was in a characteristic mood, sitting rather despondently at his desk when a small aperture in the wall behind him uttered a cheerful bleat and disgorged a sheaf of papers on his desk. They were stamped with the tasteful insignia of the death department and everything was there, drawings, full instructions down to the last detail and even small paper mache figurines. He thoughtfully erased Condemeign's and Miss Gluck's names from the folder covers and put them aside.

In any case, science be served. And nothing would be wasted after all. The clients whose payments fell in the parsimonious brackets, whose incomes just barely entitled them to the right to a managed exit, would hardly notice the difference. They would be full of the blandishments of the brochure.

Abruptly, he brightened, as though the invisible sun had winked impudently through the window well, as though a gate had opened on some blue sky over a green-grown cemetery. He hummed a solemn tune, hoping that one day he too would be a bright case in the annals. Privately, in point of ingenuity, that would cause the death department many a fine headache, and especially in originality, he would be near the top, he knew.

In the meantime, to the accompaniment of its inevitable greeting, the little aperture had delivered more work. The day was wasting.

He shook himself back to a saturnine countenance. Like all other days it was a fine day for dying. A fine time.

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The VANDERLARK

by M. ST. CLAIR

THE PECULIAR quality of deep space is hard to put into words. On earth, however isolated we are, whatever happens to us, we are yet on our home planet. The man afloat on the life raft in the Pacific, delirious with exposure and loneliness, floats nonetheless on an element

whose very saltiness relates it to the red sea water in his veins. The flyer forced down in the desert curses the rising sun; but the same sun that sucks water out of his drying tissues is the glorious temporal lord on whose radiation all terrestrial life processes depend. On earth our extremest terrors, our



ultimate catastrophes, are yet like the blows of a familiar hand. It is very different in deep space.

"Are there any more of them?" Alice asked McFeen when he came back from two hold.

"Yes."

Alice's mouth opened in a soundless O. Her hand went to her breast. After a moment she picked up the comb and began pulling it again through her brittle hair. "How many more?" she asked.

"I didn't count them. Hyra are hard to count. Quite a lot."

The comb caught on a tangle. Alice put it down unsteadily. "I wish we'd never brought them," she said abruptly. "I wish we'd never started on this trip. I hate those things. They're uncanny. They give me the creeps. What do you suppose is making them increase like that?"

"I don't know." McFeen's lean, ill-humored face was more than usually morose. "Listen, Alice. . . ."

"Well?"

"That isn't the worst of it. I found a hole in the mesh of their cage."

"You're trying to frighten me," Alice said pitifully after a second. "There couldn't be a hole in beryllium mesh."

"There was, though. I had to patch it up the best way I could. And . . . and . . . Alice, there was an eroded spot in the side of the hull."

"You mean there was a spot eaten into on the side of our ship?"

"Yes. I plated it over with the auto-weld. It was near their cage."

The comb snapped in Alice's hand. She stared at McFeen. "I told you!" she said finally. Her voice had risen several notes. "I told you it was dangerous! You wouldn't listen to me. You knew everything."

"When I said maybe there was a reason why the Biologic Survey wouldn't release any Hyra to fight the blight on Varro, you said the Survey was nothing but a bunch of fat-cat office-holders who had to make a lot of fool regulations to look like they were earning their salaries. You talked big about how it was your duty to help the poor bosula ranchers on Varro fight the blight. You tried to pretend money wasn't the

reason why you were smuggling the Hyra out to them. You knew all the answers, everything would be all right! Oh, you were Mr. Know-it-all!

"Now we're in deep space with an eroded hull. In deep space! I told you something would happen! I to—"

McFeen slapped her hard across the mouth. "Keep that gabby trap of yours shut," he said threateningly. He hung over her menacingly for a moment. And then, relenting (after all, he and Alice had been through a lot together), "Stow it," he said. "No matter whose fault it is, complaining isn't going to help us now. We've got to figure a way out of this."

Alice put up one hand and fingered her swelling lips. She nodded. "Yes," she whispered, "I guess we have."

McFeen began to walk up and down the little cabin. "The way I figure it," he said, frowning, "is, this is the first time anybody's had any Hyra in deep space. They were all right as long as we were in the system; it wasn't until we hit deep that they began to increase. The deeper in we go, the faster their rate of increase is."

"Hyra come from Pluto, and when the Biologic Survey tried them out on germs of the blight from Varro and found they controlled it, the tests were made on Terra. Still inside the system, I mean. And under system conditions Hyra increase so slowly that for one to bud off was a real rarity."

"The way I figure it, conditions are different out here in deep. Maybe it's because inside the system there's always some gravity. Even off the planets, I mean. We don't notice it, but it stands to reason it must be there. When there's no gravity at all, the Hyra start to breed. And when they breed they give off a . . . a kind of gas, or something, that attacks beryllium."

"But we've got gravity on the ship," Alice said through her swollen lips. "We don't go floating around."

"It isn't really gravity, Alice, it's just from the centrifuge."

"Oh. Well, if it isn't, what is real gravity?"

"I don't know exactly," McFeen confessed. "I never was good at theoretical stuff. Some kind of electro-magnetic force, I guess."

ALICE nodded uncomprehendingly. "Couldn't we—couldn't we get rid of the Hyra, Mac?" she asked timidly. On impulse she put out her hand and touched his sleeve. "We could think up some way of killing them if we tried, I guess. You're awfully smart. And then we could start back home. I'm so scared, honey. Those Hyra scare me so."

McFeen turned on her fiercely. "You blasted fool," he said, "don't you know how it is with us? Is something the matter with your head? I've been blacklisted. There isn't a place in the system I could get a job. There isn't a man in the system I could borrow money from. If this trip fails I'm sunk, done for, finished. Get rid of the Hyra! You brainless, blathering idiot! Do you want to starve?"

Alice shrank into herself. "But, Mac—"

"If we can get through to Varro with the Hyra we've got, the big bosula groups will make us rich. We can have everything we've ever wanted. Now shut up."

He went to a locker and began getting equipment out of it. Alice watched him, running her tongue over her swollen lips. "What are you going to do, Mac?" she asked at last.

"Rig up an electro-magnet around the Hyra," he said without turning. "It might help. It's got to help."

It didn't work. Whether or not McFeen's theory was at fault, the apparatus he rigged up around the cage of Hyra did no good. He tried chemical solutions, sprays, hard and soft radiations—nothing helped. He took to spending most of his time in two hold, trying desperately, with the help of the auto-weld, to keep the eroded patches on the hull under control. Without telling Alice, he made experiments designed to "get rid" of at least some of the Hyra. These too failed. The silicious, gelatinous bodies of the Hyra were extremely hard to destroy. Short of methods which would have endangered the whole ship, there was nothing he could do.

McFeen's natural moroseness was changing rapidly into an inflammable desperation when, quite abruptly, the increase of the Hyra stopped. At first he was incredulous. He tried over and over to count those in the cage, and gave up in disgust. More

convincing was the evidence of the hull; no more eroded patches were appearing. For some twenty-four hours he held on to his incredulity; then he allowed himself to be conquered by relief.

He went to Alice with the news and found her as incredulous as he had been. He had to take her into two hold and show her the hull's gleaming, intact sides piece by piece before she would be convinced. Then she began to giggle in hysterical relief.

"Poor old Hyra," she said, "poor old things. I guess I was pretty mean about them, Mac. I'm sorry. Poor old things!" She looked toward the crowded Hyra cage and then, rather hastily, away again. "But everything's going to be all right now, isn't it, Mac? Now they've stopped increasing, everything's going to be all right."

"You bet it is," McFeen said expansively. "Nothing more to worry about. Say, listen, Alice. . . ."

"Yes?" She was still looking obliquely toward the Hyra cage.

"What do you say we go back to the cabin and have a little drink? To celebrate."

"That's a swell idea," Alice answered warmly. "I always said you were smart, Mac. Let's go celebrate." She glanced once more toward the Hyra and then followed him out of the hold.

BACK in the cabin, McFeen broke out a bottle of soma concentrate. He and Alice drank it slowly, with much inconclusive speculation as to the reason why the Hyra had ceased to breed. When the soma was gone, McFeen brought out a bottle of phlomis. Usually he and Alice began to quarrel bitterly when they reached the second bottle in their drinking bouts, but this time they were both feeling too good for it to happen. They went on from bottle to bottle, drink after drink, in a thickening haze of moist, maudlin goodfellowship. Finally they both passed out. Meantime the ship slid on and on into the deep.

McFeen awoke some ten hours later with his sinuses thundering. Liquor always did that to him. He had a dim, uncomfortable feeling that at some point in their drinking he had insisted on telling Alice what he had really done with the 1,500 I.U.'s she

thought had been stolen. Even more faintly he seemed to remember her responding with a full and equally indiscreet account of how she had spent the three months he had been on Uranus. Oh, well, it didn't really matter. Neither he nor Alice was the kind of drinker who remembers details.

He sat on the edge of his bunk for a moment, gathering strength, and then groped his way over to the aid chest. He got out two sobrior pills and swallowed them. As his head began to clear, he looked around for Alice. She was lying on her back in her bunk, snoring heavily, with a long strand of her bleached blonde hair lying across her face. She'd be out for a while yet, he guessed.

Meanwhile, he'd better go see how the cage of Hyra was. It was always possible that they'd begun to breed again. Or was he feeling too queasy to look at them now? Any tendency to queasiness was bound to be increased by looking at Hyra. No, he'd better not put it off. Still walking rather unsteadily, he left the cabin and went into two hold.

His first impression was that the Hyra cage had grown. Surely it was much larger than it had been. Then he realized that the size of the cage was unchanged; it seemed larger because it was emptier. There were fewer Hyra in it than there had been before.

There were no visible holes in the mesh. It was impossible. McFeen, cold sober now, knelt down beside the cage and inspected the mesh centimeter by centimeter. Everywhere it was whole and unbroken; he didn't think a flea could have got out through it.

He turned on the floodlights and gave the hold an equally thorough scrutiny. No, no Hyra. Not a Hyra anywhere.

Leaving aside the question of how they had got out through the mesh, where had they gone to? Number two hold, like the others, was hermetically sealed. And he knew no Hyra had gone past him when he had broken the seal on entering. The whole thing was impossible. He must be imagining it. After all, he hadn't counted them.

McFeen leaned against a bulkhead and pressed his fingers to his head. The pain in his frontal sinus was jumping again. Maybe he was still a little bit buzzed. He

didn't think he was, but it was possible. That would account for a lot.

He looked at the cage once more. Wait, now, he had it. The reason it looked so much emptier was that the Hyra (ugh, how he loathed them—he'd never let Alice see how much) were all jammed together at one end, heaped up on one another, like a pile of oozing, pupilless eyes. Naturally the cage looked bigger when the Hyra were piled up like that. McFeen almost laughed in his relief.

He sealed the hole up carefully and went back to the cabin, his footfalls ringing unevenly. Alice was sitting up in her bunk. She had washed her face and pushed her hair out of her eyes. She nodded shortly at him when he came in. After a while she got up and began opening some soup.

THEY both felt better when they had eaten. Alice revived sufficiently to comb her hair and spray some make-up on. The pain began to die away in McFeen's head. He'd been a fool to get so excited over nothing. All the same, he was going into the hold and have another look at the Hyra. He pushed back his chair.

"Where you going, Mac?" Alice asked. She was gathering up the remains of their meal and putting them in the disposer.

"Two hold."

"They aren't increasing again, are they?" she asked in quick alarm.

"No, nothing like that."

This time there was no possible doubt. The heap of Hyra was less than half the size it had been. In the time since he had left the hold—certainly not more than three-quarters of an hour—it had gone way, way down. He could count the Hyra without any difficulty now. There were either sixteen or seventeen.

McFeen's heart began pounding wildly. His chest felt so constricted he could hardly breathe. For a moment he tried to fight his panic, to reason with himself. Then he turned and ran for Alice.

She came rather unwillingly, understanding from his hoarse incoherence only that the Hyra were not increasing any more. Even when she saw the almost empty cage she was not alarmed. "Why, honey, there must be a hole there you haven't found,"

she said reasonably. "A hole or some—" she fell silent suddenly.

"Mac," she said in a quite different voice.

"Hunh?" McFeen had been trying to count the Hyra; it seemed to him that there was one less in the cage than there had been when he went to the cabin just now for Alice.

"Mac, where's that shadow coming from?"

The fear in her voice infected McFeen with instant irritability. "What shadow?" he demanded. "What are you talking about? Haven't we got trouble enough? Be quiet! What are you starting in on shadows for?"

"Mac . . ." Alice had to swallow and lick her lips before she could go on. "Look at it. There. In the corner of the cage." She pointed with one hand.

McFeen's eyes followed the gesture. For an unbearable moment he looked squarely at the thing in the corner of the cage. His heart gave a horrible lurch, like a horse trying to unseat the rider on its back. "It's nothing," he said desperately. "Nothing, nothing! Just a shadow. The bulkhead's casting it."

"Was the shadow here when you were in the hold before?"

"I don't know. Yes, of course it was. It must have been."

Alice stood quite motionless for an instant. Her elbows were pressed to her sides, her hands against her chest, in the feminine posture of resistance and defense. "Turn the floodlights on, Mac," she said.

The lights snapped on. The hold was illuminated from all sides. It was an illumination as shadowless as that of an operating theater, as bright as the noon of a terrestrial day. The shadow in the corner of the Hyra cage was quite unaffected by it.

ALICE drew a long, quivering sigh. She put both her hands on McFeen's forearm; he could feel her trembling. "Mac, honey," she said very softly, "you know such a lot, you're so smart. Won't you tell me where the shadow's coming from? Won't you please tell me what's making it?"

McFeen looked at her. His eyes were wild. "I don't know!" he said in a high, breaking voice. "I tell you, I don't know!

Stop asking me questions! Stop badgering me! I'm getting out of here!" He pulled against her for a moment. Then he tore loose and ran.

"Mac, honey," Alice said when they were back in the cabin once more with the hold sealed behind them, "I think I know what that thing in the cage is." She spoke with surprising calmness. Though she was trembling a good deal she had, all things considered, come out of the hold in better condition than McFeen had.

"There's nothing in the cage," McFeen answered, shuddering. He uncapped a phlomis bottle and drank from it. Drops of the liquor were running down his chin. "There's nothing in the cage."

"Oh, yes . . . Mac, I think it's a Vanderlark."

He put the bottle down. The drink had helped him. "A Vanderlark? What's that supposed to be?"

"I guess there's only one of it," Alice corrected herself. She rubbed her lips for a moment with a handkerchief. "I wish my mouth wouldn't shake," she said petulantly. "It makes it hard to talk."

"The Vanderlark's a—a thing—that lives in deep space. It's made out of black. One of my boy friends who was a pilot in deep told me about it once when he'd been drinking. He was awfully afraid of it."

"I guess it's everywhere, really. Bill said it was everywhere, always, in all spaces and all times. I don't understand that very well, do you, Mac?"

"Go on," McFeen said. He turned the phlomis bottle around, studying it with haggard concentration.

"Anyway, deep is where the Vanderlark is more. Most of the time it doesn't bother anybody. But if you call it—it—it comes."

"Call it? What do you mean? We never called that thing."

"We didn't mean to call it," Alice said, "but maybe. . . . Or maybe it was the Hyra called it. I mean, when we hit deep space and they began to increase. Maybe when they increased they made a—a quiver in space that attracted it. They're not alive in the way other things are. They're different. Or maybe a part of them has always been where the Vanderlark is."

McFeen rubbed his hands over his face.

He got another bottle of phlomis from the locker, uncapped it, and then put it aside without tasting it. "What are we going to do, Alice?" he asked humbly.

Alice stood up, smoothing the folds of her wrinkled dress. In this moment she had an odd dignity. "I'm awfully scared, Mac," she said as if in explanation. "The best thing I can think of is to put the Hyra cage in the life raft. And then jet the raft off away from the ship. Maybe the Vanderlark will follow it. When the Hyra are gone, maybe the shadow will leave us alone."

There were only three Hyra left in the cage. The shadow had filled all except the cage's extreme end. McFeen looked at it and then averted his gaze. His face was so white that the brownness of his skin looked like greasepaint laid on a mask. Alice was standing behind him. He muttered something. He laid hold of the cage and tried to lift it up.

There was an instant's resistance. Then the shadow welled up enormously, in a horrible puffing-out of black. McFeen was left

holding the top edge of the cage. All the rest was gone.

He stood looking stupidly at the metal for a moment and then dropped it on the deck. He began to back away. He was screaming on a single high note. He hadn't stopped screaming when, without any perceptible motion, the blackness, the limitless blackness, closed over him.

Alice turned and ran. The life raft was aft of two hold; she couldn't have got through to the raft even if she had thought of it.

She ran from the hold to the cabin, from the cabin into the control room. The Vanderlark found her there, pressed flat against the metal of the prow, mumbling "No no no," over and over and trying to push her way out through the ship with her hands. Quietly and easily it extended itself and made her a part of it.

Then there was silence. After a while the Vanderlark flowed over the whole ship. And then there was nothing there at all but the Vanderlark.

NOVELS BY
POUL ANDERSON
KEN CROSSEN
AND
GARDNER F. FOX
WILL BE FEATURED IN THE
MARCH ISSUE
OF
PLANET



Last Call

By BRYCE WALTON

A soldier of the Disciplinary Corps hadn't cracked up in all the years of Captain Morrow's service. Bronson was the first . . .

Bronson who reckoned he was one of the rare beings who had heard THE CALL from Mars.

THE small cargo rocket was half-way to Venus when Bronson decided it was time to take it over. He took care of Orlan first. While Orlan

slept in his bunk, Bronson hit him behind the ear with an alloy bar and killed him instantly. He then dragged him down to the cargo bins. The robot was down there, wait-

ing to be sent out into the highly radioactive areas of Venus where the valuable stuff was, but where no human could go. He dumped Orlan in there. It might be construed as an accident, but it probably wouldn't matter to Bronson one way or the other.

Bronson then went up the narrow ladder to the control room where Captain Morrow sat with his broad back to Bronson, bent over the charts. He felt slightly nervous now, looking at Morrow's back. He brushed the black hair out of his eyes. His long, rather hard face tightened a little.

He eased the neurogun free and said softly. "Morrow, get up and turn around slowly. I'm taking this ship to Mars instead of Venus."

Morrow did what he was told. The Disciplinary Corps were conditioned to be amoral and fairly unemotional. But Morrow's gray eyebrows raised. His smooth tanned face twisted. "How unexpected can anything be, Bronson?"

"Get over there," Bronson said. He had figured out the new course already, and it took him only a minute to change the present one.

"A Corpsman hasn't cracked up as long as I've been in the Service and that's a long time, Bronson. What hit you?"

"I don't know. I'm going to Mars that's all."

"Why?"

"Because there's a death penalty for going there. Maybe because something's there no one's supposed to know about. I found out something very interesting, Morrow. *The Call comes from there!*"

Morrow's eyes widened a little more. But he didn't ask any more questions. Bronson tied him in his bunk with plastic cord so he wouldn't interfere for a while. He rather liked Morrow, said sentiment being unusual for a Corpsman. But that was another of Bronson's deviant characteristics that had perplexed him for some time.

By the time the rocket approached Deimos, Morrow expressed something that had seemingly been bothering him. He called Bronson in there and it wasn't an act. He was interested. He wasn't mad, or particularly disturbed. Just curious and interested.

"What are your plans, Bronson?"

"Land on Deimos and take the auxiliary sled to Mars. I'll have something in reserve and can approach Mars with less chance of being spotted. If there's anything there to spot me, I'll find out."

Morrow nodded. "That's the way I'd have done it. Will you see me again before you finish this unbelievable incident?"

"Sure. I'll have to. I wouldn't want to come back to Deimos and find you'd taken the rocket. Loneliness doesn't appeal to me. I'll be back to kill you. Maybe not the way I did Orlan. Probably in an easier way."

"Thanks," Morrow said.

Bronson felt nothing about having killed Orlan. Why should he? Such feeling was reserved for the illiterate masses. And yet, somehow he felt differently. Orlan had served in the Elimination details and had been responsible for the killing of a few thousand people. Orlan couldn't have any kick coming even if he could kick.

Bronson got the rocket down and looked out over the airless cold of the rock called Deimos, at the stark contrast of shadows dark as death and splashes of light brilliant as flame. But no movement. Nothing but an eternal lifeless cold.

He went in for his last scene with Morrow. Bronson's stomach went hollow as he stared at Morrow's empty bunk. He started to twist suddenly, grabbing for the neurogun. His arm froze.

Morrow was over in the corner, a gun in his hand. "That plastic is stronger than any alloy cable," he said, gesturing toward the bunk. "It's odd though—but a flame, say from one's cigarette lighter, will burn this particular kind of plastic like paper. You know why I waited?"

"No," Bronson whispered hoarsely.

"I was waiting for you to bring the rocket down. I had a lighter worked to the point where a pull in the right direction would slide it into my hand. Sit down, Bronson, and talk to me. Throw that gun into the corner."

Bronson threw the gun, then sat down stiffly, clenched his big hands together, feeling the sweat slippery between them.

"Tell me about it, Bronson. I'm a little curious. So curious I might do something rather unexpected myself."

Bronson felt numb and sick. And then

he started talking and as he talked he forgot about Morrow, and the last few months on Earth were vivid during re-call.

HE REMEMBERED mostly the long agonizing nights in his dark apartment alone in Central City, suffering the intense agony of increasing anxiety and fear.

He had thought from the start that it was only a matter of time until someone found out that he had gotten THE CALL.

Incredible that a Corpsman should get THE CALL. To the illiterate masses, sure. But that didn't matter. They didn't know what THE CALL was, nor what happened when they got it.

But Bronson knew, only too well, what happened. It wasn't what they thought. To them it was the culmination of an intensely religious experience, an ecstasy of realization. THE CALL entitled them to leave their routine, mindless work and play, and follow THE CALL to some Earthly paradise or other. None of them had seen it, or rather no one had ever returned to tell of it.

Bronson had seen it. A little white room. A chair in the middle. You sat there. You were strapped down. A little gas pellet dropped from the ceiling. You didn't know what hit you, but you never worried anymore. From there a conveyor belt carried you into an incinerator.

They didn't know what hit them, so it didn't matter. But Bronson knew! That made all the difference. He had been lucky to have gotten THE CALL alone in his apartment. When he had looked at Mars, that's when it had hit him. An indescribable experience bordering on dope dreaming, but not the same. An odd tingling, a feeling of marvelous detachment from anything Earthly, and after a while it seemed there were voices in his mind, and the touch of an alien thought pattern, perhaps. He didn't know.

The association of THE CALL with Mars grew until there was nothing else, except his fear of discovery. He didn't want to die. Living wasn't so bad for a Corpsman. One lived pretty high above the menial masses with their happy, idiot faces. There were many privileges, and though

a Corpsman couldn't marry, one was allowed to develop interesting friendships with the women Corps members.

That was another thing. Marie Thurston. What if, as a result of long intimacy, she should suspect?

He paced in his apartment, perspiration streaming down his throat, his muscles tense. He didn't want the little white room. Sometime THE CALL would strike him out there where people were, and he'd act like any of the others. Raise his arms. Raise them to sky, walk blindly, oblivious to anything else, his head raised, his mouth gaping, his eyes closed, feet slogging, stumbling. Mumbling—

But it seemed that Bronson was wrong about that. The masses wanted it and they didn't know what THE CALL was, so no inhibitory factors. But Bronson knew, and as a result, he found he didn't get THE CALL unless he asked for it.

He could look at Mars from his darkened quarters at night alone, and get THE CALL, and no one knew. And what surprised Bronson was that he *did* ask for it. THE CALL became an obsession, with even the Pleasure Marts, and Marie, sliding into unimportance.

He had to deal with an enigma. He had two choices. Assume he was insane, the most logical, perhaps. Or that he wasn't insane, in which case THE CALL was a phenomenon with some material basis in fact outside of himself.

He decided on the latter as a working hypothesis. He tried to find out what might really be back of THE CALL. There were the files in the Corps headquarters at Central City. He questioned some sources subtly. Studied people who got THE CALL. He even managed to talk with Jacson, one of the higher echelon Psychologists. The Psychologists had taken over, established the New System, above them was a small Elite Ruling class no one ever contacted. They lived apart with very very special privileges. The Psychologists kept things as they were. They were the Pavlovians, the reflex boys. Something to do with dogs and ringing bells.

Jacson gave the usual answer. "Regression. But only a few get THE CALL each year. It can never cause social disorganiza-

tion or dissociation. The last symptom of the old escape drive away from unpleasant reality, inherent in the germ cells no doubt. But now there's no escape. Everybody has fun. No troubles. No conflicts. Someday there'll be no one getting THE CALL."

Who was he kidding, Bronson thought? More got the call each year. That was hush-hush. Jacson said other things, too. He talked a little about the pre-New System era. It was schizophrenic, reality and fantasy all mixed up, and everyone wanting to escape. But the Pavlovians fixed that. There were bells everywhere in the world. And everyone was happy, and having fun all the time. Why should I be skeptical, Bronson thought?

He found out a few bits of information in the files, but nothing that meant anything to him. The stuff about Mars, and the penalty for going there. No reasons. It was Marie who gave him the idea, a solid course of action. They were taking a small private monorail car to the ocean for an under-sea trip. Bronson admired Marie's beauty for a while, but then he began thinking about THE CALL. Marie had a good build where it counted. The big brown eyes and the face a little on the pert side, and always so sweet and smiling. And always full of fun. One seldom saw a face that wasn't full of fun.

But he didn't react much to her beauty tonight. He stared down through the falling dusk at the ruins of old cities like bones piled in the moonlight. Monoliths, leaning and cracked, to a former age no one remembered. And about which all records had been destroyed.

Bronson said softly. "Sure, there was a big war. Because everybody was crazy, it's said. But what happened? Who fought who for what and why and how? The New System is supposed to be sane. But if we don't really know what the other was like, what's the basis for comparison?"

"You think too much," Marie said, and grinned and kissed the lobe of his ear. "The idea is to have fun. What's really troubling you, darling? You can tell me."

If I want to go into the little white room, I can.

"And anyway," she said, "what better proof of insanity do you need than the fact that they almost blew themselves and the

whole world into an asteroid belt?"

"They?" he whispered. "Who were they? Everybody didn't do it. I know all the stock answers. They weren't sane, socialized, didn't know how to live together. Big weapons ahead of social science. Imbalance blew up the world. The war came off in 2037. Economic problems were solved. Production-consumption balance figured out. Industry producing more than enough for all, no wants. *Who fought who, for what?*"

SHE frowned. He irritated her these days. He interfered with her love of living and that was a Number One Sin. Having fun was a twenty-four hour a day job. And unless you thought about proscribed subjects, even thinking wasn't considered fun.

"Darling," she said, "If you don't snap out of it, we'll have to find other companions. Life's too short to bother with questions that have no important answers."

He shrugged. Until the situation between himself and THE CALL cleared up, there wouldn't be any room for any other problems, Marie included. He said, "I wonder what's really behind those poor devils who get THE CALL?"

She gasped. "Why should you be bothered about—oh, well, they regress that's all. The psychologists let them believe they're having visions of paradise and that makes it easier for them. But it's regressive aberration and they have to be eliminated to prevent social disorganization." She sounded like a parrot, he thought. "What's so mysterious about it?"

"I don't know," Bronson said. "But the past's dead, buried, the tomb markings burned. The psychologists are the only ones who're really supposed to know. They're not talking. We're the disciplinary boys who keep things turning their way. But I'd sure like to know some things."

"You'd better snap out of it. I'd hate to think of you getting that pellet in your lap."

Bronson laughed. "I wonder if it would make any difference to you at all? The sea is full of fish, all about the same general shape and efficiency as I am. I have curiosity. An interest in what no one seems to know. A dissatisfaction, and those are my only unique qualities—those you reject me

for. Otherwise I'd be like everyone else. Drop me for those few unique qualities, and you'd find millions of others equally satisfying to your basic demands for male companionship."

She frowned harder. The moonlight streaming through the duralex windows into the lonely, hurtling car gave her blonde hair an eerie shine. "Darling, I've liked you because you're a 'man'. I didn't know you were secretly the un-fun type. Here it is then, straight. Either climb down to my level and act like a Good Joe, or I'll be selecting one of those other few million."

Bronson didn't care much now. He didn't say it to her especially. He murmured it to—the stars maybe—but he was afraid to look up there. This would be a very bad time to get THE CALL!

"All those who get THE CALL," he said, "are always looking at the Stars."

She didn't say anything.

He said, "I wonder if there's something connecting THE CALL with the stars? Something out of Space. Maybe there's something real about THE CALL."

She jumped up, leaned over him. Her eyes seemed hard now and distant. "Darling. Why the devil don't you go up there among the Stars and find out for yourself?"

He sat there staring at her, scarcely seeing her. At the moment, he didn't think about it logically. But the suggestion hit him hard and deep and he knew then, though he didn't think about it anymore that night, that that was exactly what he would try to do.

He didn't see Marie again, but once. At that time she was hanging on the crooked elbow of one of the other few million. It didn't really matter who. A big blond lad with a constant glittering smile. A Good Joe who would always be having a good time, and who never never would ask any questions.

There was a slight tinge of jealousy for a moment, and when that passed he didn't seem to care much at all. It was the System that made everybody seem so much like everyone else so that it became so difficult to see anything special in a lover. Everything was for convenience, strictly, and any irritation was an unnecessary unpleasantness that seldom occurred.

Curiosity was irritating in the New System. A person who got THE CALL was so irritating he was eliminated. They would find out sooner or later about him, and then they would kill him. So he volunteered for duty on an Earth-Venus cargo three-man rocket.

He had nothing to lose but his life in attempting to grab the rocket and take it to Mars. And almost any other imaginable way of losing it would be preferable to being taken into the little white room—knowing what to expect instead of Paradise.

BRONSON stopped talking. Morrow leaned forward. "What do you expect to find on Mars?"

"What? But—you mean you'll let me—?"

Morrow nodded slowly. "Maybe. I've been curious too at times. We have that much in common. Maybe the new blood has been conditioned more thoroughly than I have, but I've been in a long time, and I get bored with routine. Now here's a situation that is stimulating, and I say to myself, why not exploit it? However, I've never gotten THE CALL, and that puts up a wall between us. Otherwise, I feel a certain rapport."

"Well, are you making a deal or something?"

"Yes, you might say, a kind of deal. Curious, this idea of yours that THE CALL comes from Mars, added to the fact that it's forbidden to go to Mars. In the period immediately following the beginning of the New System, I understand a few rockets went to Mars. None of them ever came back. No one ever heard of them again."

Morrow sat there, apparently thinking. "So I'm curious, Bronson. You've already flaunted the law by taking this ship, killing Orlan. You've admitted you have THE CALL. Certainly you'd be no worse off if you went to Mars. You might find out something interesting. So there could be a chance for you. Go on to Mars if you like. I'll wait here five days. I'll fix the log and the reports, and arrange it so it will appear that there was an accident on Venus. If you're not back in five days, I'll stop off at Venus, load a cargo, return to Earth."

Bronson stared, then said, "And if I do come back, what then?"

"I'll rig up a story about Orlan. Too much radiation on Venus. That's happened a few times before. Officially you'll not be responsible for Orlan's death. And if you get away from Mars, you can do as you like. Stay if you want to. Or return to Earth with the rocket, and take a chance on it being discovered that you have THE CALL, or being able to conceal it. That's your business. All I ask of you, Bronson, is your word that you'll come back here in five days if you can. And satisfy my curiosity."

Later Morrow said, "Good luck, Bronson. Whatever good luck will mean to you."

Bronson thought about that as he dropped the small grav-sled toward Mars' surface. Anticipation became anxiety, fear mixed with excitement, as the sled circled the planet a number of times for purposes of observation.

What will good luck mean to me?

The memory of his experience during THE CALL came back after he spotted the big metal dome in the deep valley and landed behind a low rise of red hills. He lay there bottled up inside the narrow, gun-like barrel of the sled, his helmeted head tight up against the instrument panel.

A metal dome, like the monstrous bald head of a giant buried to the eyebrows. He had seen no other sign of habitation, no structures of anything, only barren sea-bottoms and high naked crags. The dome might be all that was left of what the traders had built here before the Blowup.

Funny, he didn't feel anything like THE CALL now. He felt nothing but fear.

Red dust sprayed up around as he crawled out of the sled. He readjusted his oxygen mask, threw the electronic rifle over his shoulder, and finally reached the top of the ridge and looked down at the dome. It had a gray quiet quality. His throat was tense and his chest ached as he got down on his stomach to watch.

No movement. No sound. A kind of panic hit him, and impulsively, he started to twist around, not wanting to return to the sled particularly, but just wanting to see it, feel a comfort with it.

The sled was gone.

Sweat ran down his face. It loosened a nervous flush along his back which prickled painfully. No sled. He blinked several times, still no sled. There hadn't been any sound. He would have heard it take off.

He jerked himself back toward the dome. He felt the thought fingers, then, like tendrils of outside force subtly probing. Something, something greater than before, stirred incredibly through his body. The old feeling of change, of unutterable newness, of an unguessed sense, opened within him like nothing before. Then . . . nothing.

He crawled down. The dome was still. No openings in it. The red dust drifting was the only movement anywhere except his own. He glanced back, hoping to see the sled. He didn't and then when he turned back toward the—

The dome wasn't there.

His fingers dug into the red dust at his sides. Sweat turned it to reddish mud on his fingers. He felt as though an immense cyst of suppuration and purulence had burst inside him. All the water in his body seemed to rush to the surface. Sweat dripped steadily, automatically from the top of his nose, over his mask. His heart pounded like a fist beating against a wall.

Just dust down there. No dome. He dropped his forehead on his arms, closed his eyes. Surely he was being influenced by outside force. Negative hallucination.

He raised his head, opened his eyes. Around him was a small island of red dust, a small oasis large enough to support him. Nothing more. Nothing else at all.

The painful tension in his chest grew until he could scarcely breathe. His jowls darkened, his mouth pressed thin by the powerful clamp of his jaw.

No—not nothing at all. Grayness, though no form, or sound or movement. Meaninglessness within nothingness surrounded by a terrible infinitude of quiet. He felt a kind of final helplessness, an utter isolation.

He glanced down then at himself as the small red oasis around him drifted as though to merge with grayness. He was going too. Even I, I, I, am going too. His feet, his legs. He brought his arms around before his face and as he did that his arms went away. He didn't feel anything.

He closed his eyes as he began, seem-

ingly, to fall. Sensations washed through him, through fibers of seeming delirium. A vortex of nausea then, resolving in his stomach.

Somewhere, somehow, there seemed to be the promise of some kind of solidity. Of being. Bright light from within, the bright splinters of brain light lancing outward through the tender flesh of his eyeballs, dancing back and around the base of his brain in reddened choleric circles. He had a brain, a mind, yet, somewhere.

Desperately he felt his mind scurrying about inside his body? Or perhaps a retentive memory of that body, like a rodent in a maze, concentrating frantically on first the nothingness that had been a limb, then on the tingling aftermath of where his fingers had once moved.

He fought. He fought to grasp something, to see, to feel, to comprehend. He fought wildly against nothing so that it all circled around and round and exploded inside, bursting, bathing him with fire as though he were inside an air-tight container boiling himself in his own accumulating heat.

He gave up. He gave in to an overpowering drawing force. Immediately there was no fear. It was as though he had stopped struggling against a strong current in a vast ocean, and was now floating serenely away, buoyed without effort, drifting forever.

He seemed to glimpse the cloudy, shapeless motion of shadows, like storm clouds boiling and driven before a gale. Familiarity grew, impressions, inchoate mental patterns. Shadows and shapes appeared in the cloudy whiteness, ghostly and strange, and wavering outlines darkened and altered.

And then he became a part of IT, of something else. And he knew. He had been tested, and there had been the madness of shock as he was being investigated, and finally accepted and absorbed. None of it was incredible to Bronson after he had been taken in. The truth came through then—clear and bright.

IT was far greater than Bronson, but he was part of IT, and IT was part of him. And he knew.

Morrow was waiting for him. As Bronson came into the control room, Morrow's face paled and he slowly licked

his lips then plunged his hand toward the neurogun. His hand froze, then crept back guiltily. He tried to speak, but his lips moved wordlessly. Sweat began pocking his face.

Bronson sat down facing Morrow. He could see Morrow now for what he was. A disease. Rather a symptom of long forgotten sickness. Maybe he could be cured.

BRONSON said. "You were curious, but you would never have gotten THE CALL. You were curious and you helped me and the world, Morrow, so I'm going to explain it to you. You want to hear about it?"

"What?" Morrow said hoarsely. His eyes were sharp with fear. "Three hours—back in three hours. You look—different, so different—your eyes and—"

"I found out things, Morrow. About the War, about the Plan. Some scientists calling themselves Freedom Unlimited, bio-chemists, physicists and geneticists, organized and said they were going to bring about the realization of man's unlimited potentialities. Create a Paradise on Earth. An old dream. Those who get THE CALL haven't been so far wrong, basically. But the Psychologists reconditioned them so the real nature of THE CALL was distorted."

Morrow shook his head.

"No, and you probably won't understand after I tell you," Bronson said. "But so what? I promised to tell you. Freedom Unlimited took hold, wiped out national barriers, started to sweep the world. They had found the secret of the human mind and nervous system, adopting the methods of atomic physicists. X-rays tear an electron from an atom. They did the same thing with genes, with the cells of the nervous system. Genes and cells, the roots of life. The rock-bottom of life. The problem of the gene and that of the atom were the same. Anyway, they learned the secret of the human brain, that it was a perfect calculating machine."

Morrow was struggling with himself, not moving.

Bronson went on. "I'm controlling you some now, Morrow. You can't move. We're in a hurry so I'll make it brief; there's a job to do. A perfect calculating machine, maybe the most perfect one in the Universe, limit-

less, inexhaustible. Secretly, Freedom Unlimited started releasing people, clearing them of aberrations, clearing their nervous systems of sludge, fusing emotion with analytical power, so the perfect calculating machine could operate. The movement spread so fast, it threatened various governments, including those in power. The status quo would rather maintain power and be ignorant and blind than to give up their power to the final step of progress. There was a pogrom. The real reason couldn't be revealed of course, so the big powers cooked up a war to cover up the purge. It got out of hand. The result was that civilization was about wiped out. The world burned. Freedom Unlimited had learned the power of the human brain, but they were too few, and the Psychologists managed to fight them long enough to carry through the war. Freedom Unlimited fled to Mars. They couldn't engage in wholesale slaughter. But they had to survive."

It was so clear now in Bronson's mind, as though he were experiencing it.

"Many of the scientists had been killed, only a few reached Mars. But they had launched a Plan. They planted basic undying commands, responses, in the reactive primitive cells of individuals whom they knew would reproduce in kind. They knew how to treat genes like chemical formulae. They knew the genes and cells would carry these commands from generation to generation. The commands led to THE CALL. A call to come to Mars, that's all. Once they got to Mars, they would be free."

Bronson leaned forward. "But Freedom Unlimited didn't anticipate the utter nihilism, the complete inhuman attitude of those who had defeated them. There were variables. Freedom Unlimited couldn't anticipate the utter power and suppression put into effect by the Psychologists, the reflex boys. That they would condition every bit of imaginative, creative, original thought and action out of everyone but a small elite who, because of their own destructive nihilistic attitudes, were never human in the first place, but only aberrated monsters. And all the rest of humanity became little more than robots, zombies, mechanicals, their analytical power chopped off, short-circuited completely. They can only have

fun like well-trained moronic children. With bells ringing everywhere, the Pavlovians turned humans into dogs."

Morrow didn't say anything. His face was pinched and afraid, confused and helpless.

"The Psychologists suspected the basis of the Plan. They converted it by conditioning into a kind of religion. Then it wasn't dangerous anymore. Meanwhile, they had also learned they could never reach Mars. There's a final step to releasing the pure analytical power of the human mind. Synthesis. Similarization. There's a dome down there shaped like the skull of a giant. Inside that metal skull is a synthesis of human intellect and machinery, pure analytical power. The brain, at its optimum, is a perfect thinking machine. No five perfect thinking machines would solve a problem differently. The result is synthesis. With synthesis came an ultimate thinking machine because it gives off energy, electrical let us say for convenience, in the form of thought.

"And that master brain down there has the will to radiate and control this great energy. It's a kind of final perfection of the unguessed power of the brain. It goes beyond the human, for them at least. They can send out beams, or rather it, sends out beams of sheer power, solid thought, by dipping into nine million brain cells plus a hundred. That brain can stop any enemy's approach to Mars, but it couldn't reach Earth. Yet.

"You follow me, Morrow?"

Morrow nodded slowly. He slumped a little. His face was shabby now and old. "Some of it," he whispered. "I don't understand. But I believe. I have to believe. You—power—"

"I HAVE a lot of power," Bronson said. "I'll have more of it. You see, the Plan really did work in a sense. Variables work both ways. Over a period of time, circumstances meshed in such a way that a Disciplinary Corpsman named Bronson got THE CALL. The sight of the planet Mars was the key-in stimulant. I happened to be alone in my apartment so that no one knew I'd been hit. I happened to be a Corpsman which meant I knew what happened to

those who got THE CALL. I couldn't accept that, so I had to look for other reasons. I also happened to never have undergone brain surgery, any prefrontal lobotomies, for example. Those things destroy the analytical mind so even Freedom Unlimited is not certain of a cure. I couldn't doubt my own sanity. So I came to Mars, I answered THE CALL. It happened to me by accident, but I had the command in my cells ready for re-stimulation."

"What now?" Morrow said. "What do you do now? What about me—and—"

"I'll go back to Earth, and start to work. With each clearing of a human being from his Pavlovian prison, I'll gain greater strength, allies. No one will know. This time there'll be no disaster because the destructive elements of war aren't there. The Psychologists are too sure of themselves. We'll win the world and free men's minds."

"And what about me?"

Bronson looked at Morrow's face. A thoroughly conditioned face really. Hardly human at all if one knew what a human face could really express. Strange, that spark of curiosity in a man whose brain had obviously undergone deadly probing with steel picks under the eyeballs, tearing apart the cells of the greatest thinking device ever developed.

"You're going to Mars," Bronson said softly. "Maybe they can clear you. I had THE CALL planted in an ancestor. You didn't. It missed you, Morrow. With the command carried forward always in the cells went also resistance to conditioning. You didn't have it, Morrow. It may be too bad and it may not. They've learned a lot in a hundred years."

Bronson got up and put a hand gently

on Morrow's shoulder. "I don't know," he said. "I'm sorry. Maybe you'll be with me later. If you're not back here in a short time, that'll mean good-bye. I'll wait for you . . ."

Morrow got up. He nodded once to Bronson, and went out. Bronson heard the sled blast out of the rocket.

Morrow didn't come back.

Bronson took the rocket up, headed toward Venus. He would pick up the cargo; the story Morrow had arranged about an accident on Venus could work just as well to explain Bronson's single return as Morrow's.

He had some advantage in his command of the human mind. But it wasn't omnipotent by any means. He would be operating alone against murderers who had turned human beings into cattle. He would have to play it slow and with the utmost care.

And though he might fail, there would be others. He could forget about Morrow and Orlan. So much of them had been destroyed by surgery that in a comparative sense, they hadn't been really human anymore.

He wasn't troubled by the tremendous challenge ahead of him. It exalted him.

Some day, we'll win, he thought. Freedom Unlimited. The freedom of the free human mind. He might fail. But THE CALL would go on. There would always be deviants from the norm. He could fail. The Plan could not.

Bronson smiled at the twilight expanse before the rocket, wide and frosty and marvelously clear.

As long as there were people, there would always be a few who would get THE CALL.

IT

By

HAYDEN HOWARD

Slowly, inexorably, the struggling Earthman was metamorphosed into a Siamese twin—a twin whose partner was jellied death.

BEFORE the Captain's feet fled ghosts of dust. Crackling with static electricity they fled before his body-charge. Ringing out through pools of heat mirage they mushroomed up the toppled walls. In his ears their crackling was laughter. In his brain he screamed at them.

Crazy dust ghosts, you are more self-willed than I.

His runaway feet splatted on and on over Hogan's deep-toed, running bootprints in a race of death he could not stop. Crazy dust ghosts. They at least could settle and die. He had the thing on his back. He had it driving him endlessly on, his body burning with exertion, his uncontrollable hands clutching the auto-electric rifle. He had already killed one of his men.

Fool, Joe Hogan, at least stop and try to kill me. This way you are only leading me to the spheroid. Then it will be able to kill you all.

Stop, stumble, anything damn you; now he was thinking at his feet. But they never faltered.

Suddenly the thing shifted its soft weight and drove his feet hard, hurling him face down behind a fallen girder an instant before Hogan's manmade lightning clanged along the girder and flushed sparrows of dust into the sky. Behind the dust the Captain's body leaped to a new location and bobbing from its cover fired, not blindly as if dust-veiled eyes had aimed but deliberately, with the slow-squeezing aim of it's organic radar. But it's batsense was too late, for it quivered angrily on his neck.

As his body burst through the dust, the Captain's good eye caught the faroff glint of sun on moving steel where Hogan fled into a jungle of girders. The Captain's long legs drove hard in pursuit, but after a few hundred yards they began to stagger.

Bloodsucker, his thoughts rang, you are as stupid as a man. Keep driving me this fast and you'll have a dead horse. And what will you be without me? Black gunk frying in the sun!

Perhaps I'll die soon, he hoped as his quivering legs rebelled and the city misted before his good eye.

Angrily it jabbed his thumb into his blinded eye. But it could not spur fresh activity from his legs. No pain could do that now.

It let him walk awhile. Soon he crossed the blurry tracks his men had left when he led them into the dead city, unsuspecting.

SINGLE file they had threaded among the collapsed dome-structures and overthrown cylindricals, a segmented worm of men probing within a vast and withered corpse. First the Captain, then Grimes, then Ives, Kwatahiri, Spencer with his hog-snouted prisma-reflex camera, finally Hogan, the worm's rear end. Six of them. The Captain had left Templar to "guard" the spheroid.

In the last city, where as in the preceding five they had found no sign of life except a scum of dried protoplasm thirty feet up on the sides of the buildings, Templar had begun to see "them". The Captain winced every time he saw Templar's dark blue eyes superimposed on the wreckage ahead, eyes widening with unspeakable horror at something no one else could see. Templar had been too good a soldier to scream, but the Captain was an old hand at spotting "symptoms", so Templar sat this one out. And the Captain had made the long-awaited decision: after this city they were going home.

Orders are orders, but a good captain will not interpret them so narrowly as to



expend his men for no purpose. There is room for judgment. He had been sent to ascertain if there were life on this seared planet. After reasonable search he had found none. They were going home.

Overhead the sky was empty, roofless, blinding white. It sucked the sweat before it could form and made their eyeballs stick. It shimmered on the prostrate girders and made them scorching hot. That the girders were silicon instead of steel did not excite them anymore. Nor did they exclaim over the generators of malleable glass with inner windings clearly visible like demonstration models or the strange doorways, all of them exactly three feet in diameter, all of them exactly thirty feet above the cracked mud streets as though the intervening space had been filled with water. It was too damn hot.

As they wormed toward the core of the city, Hogan, who followed Spencer, began to hum softly about a red-haired baby with two great big hums. He kicked up the dust and chattered to himself. He blinked at the white sky and tripped. Touching a girder involuntarily, he staggered back cursing, leaving the skin of his hand and wrist smoking on the silicon.

"Damn that Templar," he shrilled, "drinking beer in the cool of the spheroid!"

"In the cool of the spheroid," cried the echoes.

"The spheroid," replied echoes of the echoes.

Hogan dropped his rifle with a clatter and sucked his wrist.

"Shake it up," shouted the Captain from the head of the worm.

"Hogan's hurt," Spencer called from the tail. But Hogan lurched forward hissing: "Tend your own jet hole."

The Captain was back there, tall and concerned, grabbing Hogan's arm, making him show the burn. Deftly he bandaged it. "You can go back to the ship if you want to."

"Hell no and let you guys find something worth something," Hogan retorted and spat near Spencer's foot.

The Captain watched the gob of saliva sizzle and vanish. He looked across into Hogan's red-veined eyes, then down into Spencer's wide gray ones. Spencer's cheeks were puffed, flaming red. His lips were

puffed, cracked and quivering slightly as though he was getting ready to laugh or cry. He shivered when the Captain squeezed his shoulder.

Too young, the Captain thought. I shouldn't have brought him out here. But he didn't say anything, just squeezed Spencer's shoulder again and trotted back to the head of the worm.

The monster had a million legs and it was shiny blue. A smooth hemisphere, it squatted on the hub cap of the city, holding the dead lifelines, the puppet strings of the city, python-thick electrical conduits that radiated out in all directions to tie the city together, to integrate the myriad mechanisms of the ultra-technical city, to bleed the streams of electrons that were the life blood to the city. There was life in the old boy yet.

When the Captain stepped too near a conduit, lightning knocked him down. When Spencer started to help the Captain up, a four-inch spark bit his finger. Hogan hee-hawed. But when the Captain jumped up and, grinning, poked his finger an inch from Hogan's dished-in nose Hogan yelped with pain.

"Yes, Hogan," the Captain laughed, "if you had gone back you'd of missed this. Here is the brain of the city, perhaps of the planet. If there is life on this planet we should find it here."

"Check this!" Spencer shouted. He had backed away to include the entire monster in camera focus. Now he was running toward them waving a print.

While the Captain examined it, Spencer turned the pointer-knob on the back of the camera, watched the needle creep across the dial, then opened the back and removed a second print. But the Captain was still staring at the first one. He turned it upside down, held it to the light, looked at the back. Hogan elbowed between the two men and poked a black-rimmed fingernail at the top of the print.

"When did you climb on top, Spencer? I never saw you."

"I didn't."

Hogan hee-hawed. "Then how'd this picture show you standing up there? You were up there and the Captain took the picture. Come on, quit kidding, my eyes don't fool."

Very carefully, trying to keep his hands steady, the Captain lit a cigarette and inhaled. He watched the smoke rise. "It could be a trick reflection."

"Or a mirage," Spencer filled in. "It's hot enough for a mirage." Then he handed over the second print. "But in this one I'm opening a trapdoor."

"Ho!" Hogan shouted. "This one wasn't taken from the ground. Look at the angle. This was taken from a copter."

THE Captain exhaled very slowly. Due to the curve of the hemisphere, this trapdoor could not be seen from their location on the ground. But from thirty feet up, the level of the scum line, it would have been visible, if the trapdoor was really there. He was afraid it was. Somewhere. Was it on Pluto? He had heard tales of people, or were they machines? who had been able to rearrange molecular patterns, when initial cohesion was not great, by remote control. But there was no life here. The flare-up of this planet's sun had surely extinguished all life, even far below the surface.

Without a warning Hogan clipped Spencer on the mouth. Even sane he was dangerous when he thought he was being made to play the fool. Now he was a harshly breathing windmill of fists and boot-toes until the Captain stunned him with a judo blow to the back of the neck.

"You alright, Spencer? Just hold your head between your legs, you'll be all right." The Captain turned. "Grimes, would you bring me your climbing rope. No, don't tie him up. I'm going to use it to get on top of that dome." He bent on the grappling hook. On the third attempt he snagged something up there he couldn't see. "Don't look at him Spencer. Go take three more pictures; that's an order."

By the time he had dragged himself to the top, Spencer was back.

"First picture I'm climbing inside," he shouted. "Second picture you're climbing inside. Third picture Grimes is climbing inside."

"So your camera thinks it photographs the future does it?" the Captain shouted. "Ives and Kwatahiri come on up. No, Kwatahiri stay there; Spencer better stick with me today. Bring the gun, Ives."

After Spencer skinned up the rope, Ives stood holding onto it, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I guess the Captain forgot how I burned my hands yesterday."

"That's O. K.," Grimes said. "He don't care who goes. You stay here and I'll go. Bye, bye Hogan."

Hogan swore and rubbed his neck. "All of 'em, crazier'n Templar," he muttered, and he crawled over in the shade and swigged Spencer's canteen. No one was going to rabbit punch him and get away with it.

When Grimes caught up with the other two, they were already deep inside the control chambers. The translucent walls bathed the rows of blank-faced dials and drooping levers in a blue light. Further down, where they passed below ground level, they had to switch on their flashlights. The narrow ramp corkscrewed tighter and tighter as it plunged into the depths until the Captain began to feel mild twinges of claustrophobia. But it was cooler down there, and his legs kept hurrying him downward.

"Hurry up Cap," Spencer panted behind him.

Why hurry? thought the Captain, but he began to run. Why hurry? With what amounted to a great effort of will he stopped. Spencer rammed into him, knocked him sprawling, scrambled right over him without a word of apology. Grimes stepped on the Captain's back as he tried to force his way past, but the Captain grabbed his ankle.

"Leggo sir, I gotta be first," Grimes gasped.

"First where?"

"I dunno." But he tried to twist away without hurting the Captain. "If you let me go I'll find out for you," he added craftily. By this time even the glow of Spencer's light had disappeared.

The Captain shouted for Spencer to come back but there was no answer.

"I'll find Spencer," Grimes pleaded. "Please, sir." With that he kicked the Captain's wrist and escaped. Sitting up, the Captain watched Grimes' light vanish into the depths. After a moment of hesitation he followed. He wanted to go back, to get another gun, to stop and think this thing

out, but he kept on walking, part of his brain reassuring him that he was doing the right thing, searching for his men, doing his duty. But he knew that wasn't right. He was being pushed.

When the ramp levelled off he managed to stop again, sitting down determinedly on the stones. He slapped his face and shook his head, but when he arose he shuffled forward again until his light cast a dark shadow on the floor. Happy for an excuse to stop, he dropped on his knees beside it. A toy? A tiny monstrosity with a sausage-shaped thorax, six webbed feet beneath, nearly a dozen hands or feelers on top, some of them specialized pincers or hooks, others as generalized as the hands of a man, all of them semi-retractable. It had a rubbery feel. What bothered him was the head. There really wasn't any, only a mount for two froglike eyes, no space for a brain. Where the neck should have been clung a small blob of waste. But he had difficulty in pulling it off, and when he did he saw it was part of the design, an auxiliary creature bloated like a woodtick, a bladder and a fang-ringed mouth, nothing more than a toy parasite.

Repressing a shudder he fitted the toy back together and dropped it in his pocket. Then his feet hurried him down the ramp. It was plunging again, steeper and steeper until he tripped and rolled, cradling his flashlight, and banged against something hard and vibrant. All around him in the darkness, water-choked voices sang: "Go on, go on, go on," until he flashed his light about and his eyes assured his ears that the voices were only the sounds arising from tall glass cylinders of rhythmically perking mercury.

Abruptly he realized that the mercury columns operated the tall black machine in the center and that this was a hydraulic press which in turn fed the humming electric motor beside it. Piezoelectricity on a practical scale, electricity produced from the compression-expansion of rock crystals in the press, power for the press produced from the expansion of mercury vapor, the heat for expansion drawn from the core of the planet, the whole set-up was as immortal as machinery could be. It might have been running for thousands of years.

But everything was swept from his mind by the overpowering vision of a round red door with a handle shaped like the letter S, and his body hurried across the room, down another passageway, around a curve and there was the door, with Grimes and Spencer struggling to turn the handle.

They didn't bother to look up until he shoved them aside. Seizing Grimes' rifle, he jammed the barrel into the S and levered the handle, oblivious of the fact that he was smashing the front sight. Slowly the door opened from its center, widening like Spencer's camera's eye.

"Stay back, that's an order," he heard his voice say. Then his body lunged through the aperture into freezing darkness. The cold room arched away in all directions, drawing his flashlight through metal grill-work into nothingness. The light caught something black and swollen up there, almost directly above his head. But the foul odor at his feet drew the light down onto black, ruptured sacks that had fallen from their perches in the grill and spoiled and smeared the floor with corruption. Unwillingly he knelt to touch one of them. Cold, and the floor was icy cold, throbbing gently beneath his feet, refrigerated.

Overhead something hissed, and his mind tried to break for the door. He saw himself doing it, rushing past the two faces in the doorway, fleeing up the ramp to the surface. But he was still there, almost devoutly kneeling when the thing rustled silkily and plopped upon his neck.

HE GASPED instinctively throwing up his arm to knock it off. But it froze his arm midway, and he knelt there, a statue, trying to make his arm obey. A sharp pain told him it was boring into his neck. Then he fell on his side, his legs kicking like a dying rabbit's. In a moment he couldn't even do that. By the time Spencer reached him he was completely paralyzed and voiceless. But his mind was clear again, clearer than it had been since he approached the great control dome on the surface, almost as though the thing had to devote its entire tele-force to the control of his body. There was none left for Spencer and Grimes. As they raised his head and chafed his hands and made ineffectual suggestions

they seemed perfectly normal again. He realized that in the semi-darkness they had not noticed it on his back.

To his horror he felt the big muscles of his body moving one by one, experimentally. His hands clasped and unclasped of their own accord. His vocal cords emitted a frightened croak as his left hand closed about the barrel of the flashlight. Without other warning he clubbed Grimes' forehead and felt bone crush beneath the blow. Mouth sagging open with the amazement of death, Grimes sank to the floor. The Captain's body lunged clumsily over him, flailing the flashlight at Spencer's head.

"Captain, you hit Grimes," the young man shrielled the self-evident as he backpedalled, forearms shielding his head from the Captain's awkward left-handed blows. Whirling he fled through the doorway and along the corridor. But he was a short-legged young man, running too long in the same spot, and the Captain loped behind him, heavy flashlight raised to strike.

With a terrific effort the Captain struggled to recapture his own body. Concentrating a rush of thought on his right knee he made it buckle, pitching him on his face upon the stones. It had not yet learned to put out his hands to break his fall. When it managed to raise his head, Spencer's footsteps had faded away and it was quivering angrily.

Then came further horror. His own fingers punished him. Experimentally they probed his left eye. When the thing felt his tremors of agony it screwed his thumbnail into the eyeball. When he regained consciousness the pain was on the other side of a wall of numbness. His body sat up, and he realized that it had been unable to move him while he was unconscious.

Perhaps I can catch it by surprise? Cautiously he raised his right hand toward the back of his neck, thinking a jumble of thoughts that he hoped would conceal his purpose. He almost reached it. Quivering angrily it forced his hand down again to discipline his eye. Through the curtain of pain he thought back: if it had access to the thinking part of my brain, my first thought about catching it would have given me away. As it was, I very nearly succeeded. It is torturing me now because it

is frightened. Next time it is off guard, I will strike quickly.

AS IT stood him up, he tried again. Its punishment made him faint. But that was a moral victory for him. If it became over-emotional and killed him, that would be a moral victory too. With the death of Grimes, he had lost interest in survival, but the thing had not. He suspected it knew it was the last of its species. Probably it's drive for survival and reproduction was tremendous. If he were to die, the thing, like the tiny model parasite in his pocket, would be without means of locomotion. A helpless sack and a mouth, that's all it would be if he were dead.

It walked his body unerringly through pitch darkness to the refrigerator room, picked up the rifle by the barrel, ran his fingers over the smashed front sight, down the barrel, over the electro-coil and onto the action. When it started pulling the switches while the muzzle still leaned against his chest, he became hopeful that the end was in sight. But the safety-catch proved to be on. Finally it released that. Resting the barrel on his shoulder, it went after the switches again, while he tried surreptitiously to aim the muzzle where it should be.

Lightning scorched the back of his neck and the gun clattered to the floor. But he felt it shaking violently on his back. When he made a grab for it, he almost caught it off guard. Then it didn't even punish him, just clung there shaking. Inside his brain, the Captain smiled. Apparently it was unfamiliar with such weapons. He was surprised it's first move had not been to retrieve some powerful weapon of its own. Perhaps the planet had been so well organized or even civilized that there had been no stimulus to invent or use weapons of this sort?

Cautiously it raised the rifle, this time pointing the muzzle the other way. Lightning flared. It dropped the rifle. Quickly it picked it up and fired again and again like a child with a new toy. When it raised his hand, instead of gouging his eye, it gently stroked his cheek. He shuddered.

Bending him over, the thing ran his hands over Grimes. It felt Grimes'

wrist, then felt his, then felt Grimes' again. Suddenly it released him and he sank limp and exhausted across Grimes' body. Perhaps it wanted to see if he could help Grimes, bring him back to life, otherwise, why this solicitude? He considered making another grab for it, but he knew it would be on guard. He would be smarter to cooperate. He went through the motions of artificial respiration, then shrugged. What would it make of this gesture? He began to talk to the thing, then to tap out morse code on the floor, finally to trace out triangles, squares, pentagons with his fingers: no response. Without warning he grabbed with both hands.

It did not even bother to punish him. It set his hands to gathering the small cold bodies of its species. When he was through they made only a double handful that he carried up a twisted ramp, through doors that creaked automatically in the darkness, to a warm, faintly sweet smelling room. Here he laid the bodies on a corrugated ledge.

In darkness he knelt and beat his knuckles on the floor. Rising, his fingers pressed a button. Something clicked and it began to swing its weight rhythmically as if it danced to a sound he could not hear. Or could it be rhythm received through some other sense perception unknown to man? After a while he pressed several buttons in rapid succession. A blinding electric arc leaped from the ceiling, turning the heap of bodies into a crackling funeral pyre.

The smoky light revealed row on row of strangely carved figures, model dome-structures and cylindricals, shapes strung from wires resembling fish, toys like the one in his pocket, and many-creased forms resembling walnut meats or possibly brains. As the light died away, it jabbed the Captain's eye as if to make him feel pain in honor of its dead companions. It jabbed with increasing savagery until he fainted and ended the ceremony.

When he regained consciousness it set his hands to scraping the ashes into a smooth bowl. His hands placed this on a shelf and his feet carried him back down the twisting ramp. As he reached the bottom he heard the excited voices of Spencer

and Kwatahiri, then Ives' deeper voice as his feet hesitated in the corridor. It clutched his rifle hard. Turning into a side room it snatched up something that felt like wire netting. Then it made his feet walk softly down the main corridor toward the voices, and he mentally cursed his men for their ill caution. All three fools had crowded into the refrigerator room. But to his relief his body hurried up the ramp, through the power room, then up the second ramp to the control room and the surface.

As the glare of the sun struck the thing, it made a long shudder pass through the Captain's body. Then it prodded his blind eye as though it somehow blamed him for the desolation out there. But it prodded him with finesse as it drew him back out of the sun, for his efficiency was essential, no matter what its next move.

From below drifted Hogan's hoarse voice crooning of a red-haired baby with two great big hums. The thing unbuttoned the Captain's shirt and drew it over his head like a cowl. Then it slung the rifle and opened out the wire net. After innumerable vacillations and quiverings it sent him sliding down the rope, unconscious that the rope was burning through the skin of his hands.

"There you are," Hogan shouted. "I knew Spencer'd pulled a Templar. What'd you find?" He wasn't going to make anything of the rabbit punch.

The Captain's legs gave way as they struck the ground and he sprawled awkwardly.

"Geeze Cap, you really burnt your hands. What's the matter, are you sick? What happened to your eye?" As he extended his hand, the Captain's body leaped away. As it lunged forward again, net swung high, his shirt slipped back, making Hogan's expression change from surprise to bug-eyed horror. Netting a strong man did not prove as practical as the thing may have imagined. Mouthing obscenities, Hogan shook loose, scooped up his rifle and fled. As he reached the cover of a cylindrical, he whirled, fired, missing an easy, motionless target in his haste, and fled again. The thing unslung the rifle and started in pursuit.

Hogan's tracks were easy to follow in the dust, but where whirling wind from

the cross streets had swept them away, the thing followed as confidently as ever. It was not hunting by sight. After they exchanged shots and crossed over the trail the party had made on entering the city, it became obvious that Hogan was leading it straight to the spheroid. The Captain's brain cursed him silently. The fool!

As he topped the last rise, the thing stopped him abruptly. There, gleaming in the sunshine was the spheroid. Before the entry hatch two tiny figures gesticulated. Hogan was telling Templar all about it. Shivering, the thing pulled the shirt up over his head again. Then it dallied, still shivering, obviously searching for a plan of action.

Didn't expect anything like that did you? the Captain thought. He tried to speak and did manage to drool a little. Then it started him down the hill, freezing his left hand at waist level long before he could grab. Real terror struck the Captain now. The thing was going to try some sort of bluff. It was going to try to take the ship.

"Here he comes," shouted Templar.

It waved the Captain's left arm and broke into a run. Templar ran to meet it. But Hogan ran after Templar and grabbed his shoulder. Templar shook him off.

"Stop," Hogan screamed. "I tell you, he's a murdering maniac."

But Templar ran to the Captain.

"Put your arm over my neck, sir. Gee you've hurt your eye terribly."

But the Captain gave no sign of understanding. He pulled back suspiciously when Templar reached for his arm.

"Sir, are you all right? I think Hogan is almost crazy enough to shoot us. He's gone absolutely mad."

Covering them with his rifle, Hogan came closer, his dust-streaked face aquiver with indecision. "He's nuts Temp. Look at his face. Why doesn't he speak?"

Shoot me you fool, the Captain's brain screamed. Beneath its hood the thing quivered violently, but it held the Captain's body under perfect control.

HOGAN jammed his rifle muzzle against the Captain's head. "Speak, damn you, speak. What's on your back? You see Temp, he's so crazy he can't even speak—"

Violently the Captain's body grappled for possession of the rifle. With a blinding flash it went off between them. Over and over in the dust they rolled, while Templar danced about and did nothing. As the Captain's hands clamped on Hogan's windpipe he saw Templar had finally picked up the rifle. Surely he must see the thing on his back. Shoot me, you fool.

Gasping, Hogan tore loose and swung his fist against the Captain's teeth. Lunging, he drove his knee into the Captain's stomach.

In that moment Templar made his decision. He slammed down the rifle barrel on Hogan's skull.

Gently, the Captain's hands took the rifle away from Templar. They pointed the muzzle at his belly and signalled for him to lie down. When Templar stared uncomprehending, they fired a blast near his cheek. By the time the Captain's hands had finished trussing Templar with his own trousers and belt, the blue-eyed young man had noticed the thing on his Captain's neck—and quietly gone mad.

After binding Hogan's unconscious bulk, it dragged both of them into the spheroid. There it frantically opened drawers, thumbed through illustrations in books and manuals, pulled levers and pressed buttons indiscriminately, as though it was looking for a clue to guide its further actions. It had dropped its net by the control dome. Now it seemed to be searching for some more effective means of taking men alive. The auto-electric gun manual held its attention, especially the circuit diagrams that showed how the deadly stream of electrons might be widened into a stunning spray. Unfortunately there was even a line drawing of a man stunning and tying a venupod. It stared for a long time at the accompanying frequency tables. The setting-numbers on the receiver of the gun, the corresponding numbers on the table, the logic of mathematics made the thing's inability to read words quite immaterial.

When Spencer clambered through the hatch, the diffusion ray stunned him in his tracks. Quickly it leaped out and stunned Ives and Kwatahiri. After the Captain's hands had bound them with climbing ropes, they lay on the floor of the spheroid, their

limp bodies gradually stiffening with horror as the effects of the ray wore off. As their voices began to curse and argue and plead, night descended. But it did not need to turn on the lights.

By morning the men were moaning for water, and the thing seemed to notice the Captain's increasing weakness. It freed him to see what he would do to help himself.

The Captain lunged for the water faucet, but, as the cool water trickled before his eyes and the men on the floor cried out for it, the Captain was thinking. Taking down the small bottle of poison intended for zoological specimens, he poured a few drops into a glass; not much, his stomach would throw back a large dose before it had time to take effect. He had seen that Ives had already rubbed his wrist bonds thin. In a few hours Ives would be free to help the others.

As the Captain raised the glass, the thing quivered and forced his arms down. It made him kneel beside Hogan, hold the glass to Hogan's lips. The still-dazed man drank greedily.

While Hogan was dying, a slow process, it savagely punished the Captain's eye. But he welcomed the pain. Even the thing was unable to control the heaving of his chest or the tears coursing from his good eye.

Spencer raised his head: "Captain, if you can hear me, I want you to know that we understand what has happened. We are still with you, if you are there. If you have to kill us to beat this thing, that's all right."

After that, it gave the Captain no more freedom. With much hesitation and quivering it filled a clean glass and gave his four surviving men water. Then it carefully examined the food in the refrigerator. But Ives was the only one who would eat. After a safety-waiting period, it stuffed the Captain's mouth with only those kinds of food that Ives had eaten.

When the sun began to slant into the open hatchway, the Captain felt the thing's body take on a new motion, a slow, regular rolling motion that increased in speed as it sat his body beside Ives and bent his back until the thing touched Ives' neck. When Ives ceased screaming, the Captain's body rose and turned. On Ives' neck clung a tiny replica of the thing.

By late afternoon it had also made Templar and Kwatahiri hosts. Only Spencer seemed conscious, his wide gray eyes watching the Captain's every move. When it tried again to feed him, he clenched his teeth and turned his head away. But the others chewed and swallowed mechanically.

When it went back to the refrigerator, the Captain managed to deflect his left hand so that it drew out a can of beer instead of a grapefruit. A vague hope arose in the Captain's brain as his hands clumsily punched a hole in the can. The thing filled a glass and knelt before Spencer.

Drink it, drink it, drink it, the Captain's brain shouted.

Spencer stared at the Captain's face for a long time as though he was trying to read something there. Then he opened his lips and gulped the beer.

When the thing sat the Captain down at the table, he noticed the grenade lying between the screw driver and the artichoke. So near but yet so far, if he could only pull the pin. But his hands moved past the grenade to the screw driver. The screw driver was the thing's beer can punch. Using the wrench for a hammer, it raised a geyser of beer. Of its own free will it raised the can to the Captain's lips.

The beer was bitter, stinging pleasure, cold in the throat, warm in the belly. He put it away fast and reached for another can. After a slight hesitation it freed his hands to punch the holes, one to take the gush of beer, one to keep it flowing. It fizzed in his mouth and bubbled out of the corners and over his chin. A cold stream crept down his neck to his collar bone. The third can he drank more daintily. With the fourth he felt the thing relax. It's weight sagged a bit as though it was feeling the effects of the alcohol in his bloodstream, and it let his hands relax upon the table.

Gently he glided his left hand toward the grenade, but the hand froze, then curled back for another can of beer. His right hand was a trifle unsteady as it raised the can to his lips. On the next can he forgot to punch the second hole and gulped the golden pleasure in erratic jets until he was sucking an empty can. Both he and it were game for another. He could feel the beer

bubbling and trying to come back up. He could feel the tautness of his grinning lips, the limpness of the weight upon his neck. Gradually he edged his left hand toward the grenade, but the thing curled it back for another can.

Opening this can was troublesome and he forgot about the grenade. His wife smiled at him across the table. Soon they were floating down through blue warmth toward Earth so green and soft beneath.

"S' bedtime," he mumbled. The sound of his own voice sat him up straight. He remembered where he was and his smile went away. Then he felt it coming back again with his teeth hard beneath it. Very cautiously he slid his right hand up his cheek and back over the short hair on his neck until his fingers touched the thing's shrinking tissue. It slid his hand away and quivered in gentle admonition.

"Please," his voice whispered, "it will feel so good." And his hand tried again, like a gentle lover.

Across the room Spencer's eyes glistened wide in the gathering dusk. Templar moaned softly in his sleep. The faucet dripped loudly. And the Captain's fingers closed about something smooth and yielding, yet plump with blood, a tick ripe for the bursting.

With a great brassy shout he drove his fingers through it. As his nails gouged through writhing jelly, the agonies of the thing's short-circuiting nervous system became hammer blows upon the base of his skull. Frantically, with numbing fingers, he tore at the connecting nerve links. He was a Siamese twin whose partner was death.

The floor spun by. A blazing nova, then galaxies of stars burned out his optic nerve and darkness struck. For an instant infinity equalled zero.

Then his good eye opened and puzzled at the mountain so close its wrinkled gray surface was a blur. As he raised his cheek from the floor the mountain became Hogan's trouser leg. The Captain felt his throat constrict. Painfully word-pictures forced themselves upon him. Hogan, Grimes, Hogan, Grimes, they whirled in a tightening circle of hysteria.

"Captain," Spencer's quiet voice broke the chain of self-recrimination. "Can you hear me, Captain?"

The Captain leaped erect and brushed a nasty mess of skin and jelly from his shoulder.

Think about it later; let the court of inquiry think about it, he told himself. You're their Captain, man. Act like one.

Swiftly he untied Spencer. Then, kneeling beside each of the three unconscious men, he carefully extracted the thing's progeny from their necks, twisting and bullying the tiny parasites until they drew in their nerve extensions and came loose in his hands.

In the icebox between the celery and the beer cans they resembled three over-ripe avocados as their frantic pulsations died away and the cold made wrinkles in their skins.

"When are you going to kill them?"

"The trans-galactic biology teams will want them alive. We will keep them in suspended animation the way the thing survived so long until we reach—." The Captain's voice faltered as he readied Templar's hypo; Ives was already groaning and trying to sit up, but he wanted Templar to awaken more gently. "—Earth."

"Earth," Spencer repeated solemnly. "Earth, Earth, Earth." Suddenly he smiled and the Captain's smile joined him.

They were going home.

The Dancers

By WILTON HAZZARD

There was time now—plenty of time on this strange, dark planet—for those erudite exiles from frozen Earth to ponder the value of man's accumulated knowledge.

IT WAS the hour before dawn. In the middle of the night the big ship had landed on the new planet, the satellite of the sun Proxima. Now they sat in the dark waiting, and they talked.

"I wish we hadn't killed them," Rossiter said softly. His profile was faintly visible against the diffused light of the stars. "It's a bad sign, a bad start for a new life."

"They attacked us," Bernard answered quickly.

"Two spears, against forty blasters and stun guns?" Rossiter laughed. "An attack! We should have met them with stunners at low charge. But McNess ordered us to blast. The woman and the baby stick in my craw."

"All our nerves were on edge," Bernard answered thoughtfully. "I know I was afraid when we first stepped out of the ship. There was something terrifying about air, and space, and the sky. But you're right, of course. We shouldn't have been ordered to blast." The two men were sitting a little apart, but there was a murmur of many low voices around them as the others from the *Elpis* waited and talked.

"I wonder why they attacked us?" Bernard went on. "Primitives usually run. We must have been an unbelievable sight to them, spiraling down out of the sky."

"I don't know," Rossiter replied wearily. "And we can't ask them. They're dead, all five of them. That wind's cold." He was shivering.

"You could go back inside the ship," Bernard said half-humorously.

"I'm sick of the *Elpis*. We all are. Eight years of it—it's too much. We'll get used

to the wind, I suppose. There's going to be lots of wind, with so much water and only this one land mass on our new world. It's not like earth."

Bernard made an involuntary movement. Then he relaxed. "I suppose the taboo is lifted now that we've landed," he said heavily. "We can talk about earth again, and wonder, and speculate. I wonder what they're doing now on earth."

"Starving. Freezing. Burrowing into the ground for coal and warmth. They must be living a good many hundred feet down now, those that are left. And the seas are frozen. There's an ice sheet from pole to pole.

"We astronomers paid you back finely, didn't we, Bernard, for all the appropriations you got us in committee meeting. You were always generous with us and the physicists. But when the catastrophe happened, the mystery, the debacle, we couldn't help. We didn't know the answer. We didn't know."

"I remember—" Bernard answered, choking a little, "—I remember the day before it happened. There was a report on my desk about some tribe of Indians high in the Andes. The report said that the parents had been persuaded to send their children to the school in the foothills, that even among the adults illiteracy and ignorance were being eliminated. It was the last of the ignorant tribes.

"I looked up at the sign over my desk and read the motto, 'There is nothing unknowable. There are only things not yet known,' and I thought, 'Yes, we're getting

near our goal. We've conquered ignorance and superstition and illiteracy. And as time goes on we'll know more and more things. The area of the unknown will constantly diminish. Knowledge is like an expanding circle of light that eats into the darkness. Then the darkness came. And you didn't know."

"WE KNOW what happened well enough," Rossiter corrected. He sounded older than his fifty-two years. "I was at the observatory that night. I remember thinking that it was almost time for me to go to the dormitory to sleep. It was summer; Sirius and the sun would both soon be up. Sirius rose, blazing in the darkness, and after him Leo, in the southeast. It should have been invisible in the sunlight. I couldn't believe what I saw. And still the sun didn't come up.

"We know what happened in a way. We don't know how or why. The sun, our sun, never rose. The sun just disappeared."

"How softly everyone's speaking," Bernard said irrelevantly. "It's the sky and the darkness. I could hardly hear you." He got to his feet.

"Where are you going, Tom?" Rossiter asked.

"I want to look at the bodies. The people we blasted, I mean."

"That's morbid. Don't go, Tom. Stay here."

"But I want to go. I'll be back." He moved away through the dimly visible outlines of men and women seated on the ground.

He came back after a while and sat down by his friend in silence. "I think I know why they attacked us," he said after a pause.

"Why?"

"I think we interrupted some magical or religious rite. They were at a very low level of material culture, of course. The points on the spears were stone, and they were wearing garments of what looked like some sort of tree bark. Not woven cloth. But the young men were wearing rattles of some sort of shell around their ankles, and the old man was holding a little drum in his hands.

"You see, they had a good cranial capacity. As soon as human beings can think at all, they start trying to impose their will on the universe. I think they met here by the shore to perform some sort of magic. The woman and the baby watched, the old man played his drum, the two young men sang and danced. Perhaps this bit of the coast was sacred to them. Perhaps, when we set our ship down here, we profaned a sacred place."

"The woman and the baby bother me," Rossiter said thoughtfully. "It seems a dreadful thing to me to kill a woman. Ever since Kate died . . ."

Bernard rested his hand for a moment on the older man's shoulder in sympathy. "It was wrong. We shouldn't have done it," he responded. "But we must forget it. Tomorrow, when it's light, we'll bury them."

"I wonder if they were the only humanoid life on the planet," Rossiter said, pursuing his own train of thought. "This island was the only land mass we found anywhere. If those five, so few . . . When we blasted them, did we wipe out the planet's native humanoid life?"

"Possibly," Bernard admitted uneasily. He cleared his throat. "If they hadn't attacked us we could have helped them. They were primitive, superstitious, blankly ignorant, of course. But they had good skulls. They could have learned. We'd have taught them, as we did the primitives on earth. We'd have led them gently away from their superstition and ignorance. As we did on earth. Let's not talk about it any more."

Rossiter made a sort of noise. Bernard leaned forward quickly. "What's the matter, Dick? Are you all right?"

"I—what you said—" Rossiter seemed to grope for words. "Be quiet a minute, Tom. I want to think. What you said then—I—it—" He laid his hands over his eyes.

"I'll get Dr. Ferguson," Bernard offered.

"No, I'm all right." Once more he fumbled for words. "I've suddenly come to understand. You made me understand—as we did on earth."

"What—"

Rossiter got to his feet. In his normal voice, which sounded very loud in the darkness, he said, "I know what made the sun go out."

The murmur of low talking ceased suddenly. There was a sense of listening, of half-seen bodies leaning forward intently in the starlight. Rossiter said, "On earth there was always somebody dancing."

"Dancing? I don't see—" Bernard spoke in wonderment, but there was an odd, apprehensive note in his voice.

"There was always somebody dancing," said Rossiter. He halted. Then he continued in a stronger voice, "Always, in the high mountains there was somebody fasting and praying. Always before dawn there was the sound of the rattles and the stamping footsteps."

"In the winter the flame leaped high on the rock through the swirls of snow as they made fire magic. They danced. They prayed. They chanted. And the sun came up."

"What are you trying to say?" Bernard demanded. He had risen and was standing facing the older man.

"That people used to think, before we taught them better, that they had something to do with the sun's rising. They grew too wise to believe it any longer. But who knows? Who knows whether they were not right? Whether the force that impels the stars is not, finally, the human will?"

There was a silence. Somebody laughed nervously.

Dr. Ferguson had already stepped forward and was holding Rossiter by the elbow. Together, he and Bernard urged the older man toward the *Elpis*. They spoke to him gently. They did not argue or disagree with him. They led him inside the ship.

Much later Bernard came out alone. Dr. Ferguson had remained with Rossiter, quieting him with sedatives. It was still quite dark.

Bernard looked up at the sky, sighing. "How long the dawn is in coming," he said, as if to himself.

MURDER

**A killer's
footsteps
slithering
softly in
the gloom,
moonlight
glinting on
a weapon
—then the
merciless
stroke of
murder!**



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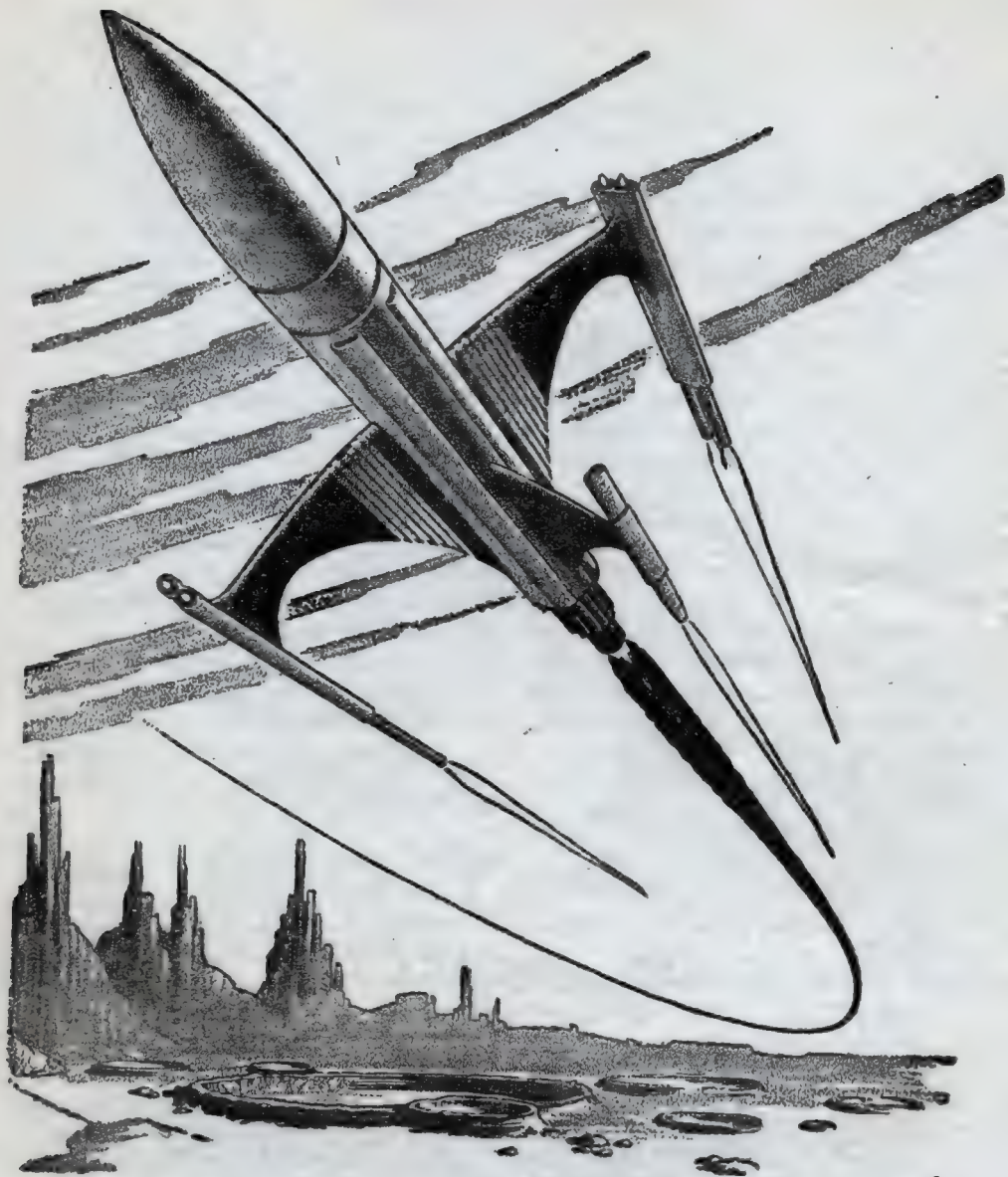
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Calling World-4 of Kithgol!

By H. B. FYFE

*Accidentally, Yorgh sent whirling off into space a grim,
200-year-old message . . . and lived to see his
dead world meet the vibrant future.*





THE Star was obscured by blowing sand, and Yorgh could not see much of The World either. The wolly he rode snorted in panic at the howl of the sandstorm. Finally, the big hunter swung down to the ground and dragged the six-legged beast by the guide rope.

"Where are those trees I passed this morning?" he muttered.

He longed for a drink from the water-skin slung at his shoulder with his rolled cloak, but there was so much sand in his

short, golden beard that he would probably choke himself.

The sand whipped against his gray pants of coarse wool and the dark red tunic for which he had given the Sea People two dozen copper arrowheads, and swirled loosely beneath his calf-high leather boots. Yorgh squinted his eyes till they were mere gleams of bright blue among the laughter wrinkles.

"And I didn't even find the copper rocks!" he growled. "I should have stayed in the flatlands, hunting with the others."

He discovered that he was heading into a gully where the ripping winds had scooped sand from between ridges of dark rocks. Yorgh was not sure whether it offered shelter or the chance to be buried alive, but he plunged ahead to investigate. Within fifty paces, the howl at his back diminished.

"Not the rocks; it's a lull," he exclaimed, peering upward.

The sky was an ugly reddish brown, dark and menacing. He wondered how soon more tons of sand would sweep down to refill the gully. As he gazed upward, a round stone rolled under his foot and he sprawled forward. Even as he dropped, it seemed that he was falling further than he should be.

He brushed sand from his eyes and looked up. From the edge of a hollow whirled from the floor of the gully by opposing winds, the woolly stared down at him with an expression of scared idiocy. The ends of his horn bow and copper-tipped lance thrust up beside the saddle.

As Yorgh scrambled up and his head came above ground level, he saw that the hollow was at the junction of his gully with another. Sand was already beginning to collect again as the wind shifted. Behind a worn rock at his side, Yorgh glimpsed a glint of metal.

Copper? he wondered, stepping forward.

It was not copper, nor any other metal he had ever seen.

To judge from what protruded above the sand, the thing was shaped slightly like the wagons the people of the Hunter tribe used in their migrations. Every part of it was smoothly rounded, even the skeleton sitting in the front seat.

Yorgh stared, feeling the prickle of rising hairs on his neck.

The moan of rising wind made him shiver. At least, he told himself it was the wind. It sounded uncomfortably like a wailing spirit.

Any skins or leather padding on the seat had long since crumbled. Only sand-scoured bones and metal remained. Except—

Something gleamed from the small deposit of sand remaining about the feet of the skeleton. Yorgh reached out cautiously and touched the end of a whitish metal

cylinder as thick as his thumb. It was loose enough to pull out. He did, and it lay in his palm, about six inches long.

Yorgh could see no mark of any kind on the surface. He wondered if it would stand sharpening as a spearhead.

"Must have been one of the Old Ones," he muttered uneasily. "It is said they had strange and wonderful powers. I wonder if this was one of the wagons that skimmed over the ground with nothing pulling them, as are told of in the legends."

He had been turning the cylinder over in his hands as he considered. One end moved beneath his fingers and the opposite extreme abruptly flashed a bluish green light at him.

"Gaaghk!" choked Yorgh, and flung the thing from him.

It arched over the edge of the hollow, and its flight was followed by the thud of hooves as the woolly scampered away. The growing wind was again raising stinging flurries of sand.

"Ho! Come back here, you knob-headed idiot!" roared the man, scrambling up the side of the hole to give chase.

THE animal, stung by the flying sand, ran faster. Yorgh stooped, groping for a stone to throw ahead of it, so as to turn it back in his direction. His fingers grasped upon something hard, but the shape felt wrong and he looked down.

It was the white metal cylinder.

I never should have touched it, he thought. Naturally, it would have a curse on it. I must put it back!

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw there would be little time. Sand was heaping up again all along the gully. But the woolly had disappeared up a slope to the surface of the desert.

"I'll come right back!" said Yorgh aloud, with an uneasy feeling that there just might be someone to hear him.

He thrust the object into the leather pouch on his belt beside his bronze knife, and ran up the slope with long-legged strides, even in the sliding sand. The woolly was out of sight.

The moan of wind rose to a shriek from the blackening sky.

Yorgh staggered blindly ahead. Once,

peering between his fingers, he thought he caught a glimpse of the animal, but a gust whirled him around and he lost the direction. He floundered onward, wishing he had stayed in the gully. Then he remembered the company he would have had, and wondered if the Old One had been trapped by a similar false hope of shelter there.

With fumbling fingers, Yorgh unslung the cloak that hung behind his shoulder and wrapped it about his head. It gave some relief, and he plodded forward, afraid to stop in one spot.

Something jarred his shoulder roughly. Yorgh reached out, but his wild grab did not find the wooly fur of his mount.

"The trees!" he gasped in relief.

It was the only shelter this side of the hills that separated the desert from the grassy plain. Yorgh pulled off his cloak, tied one corner to the tree with the strap of his water-skin, and set about making as good an imitation of a tent as possible. It might at least give him breathing room till the storm ended.

The Star shone hotly at noon the next day before Yorgh tramped wearily into the shade of the tree-lined creek that would lead him to his people's camp on the plain. He was lured to this route partly by the promised coolness and partly by the sight of a herd of kromp out on the open flat. These were six-legged, like every animal on The World except man. There were eighty or a hundred, and a few of the ill-tempered bulls were already sniffing the air and aiming their four horns about.

Yorgh splashed water over his face and neck. He wished he could stop for a swim, but he had walked all night after the sandstorm died down to get through the hills and out of the desert. The only thing which could have kept him from the camp, where he could hope for badly needed sleep, was a chance to find the gully again. When the sand had settled, however, he had found—not entirely to his surprise—that he had completely lost the direction.

"It's like the old legends," he murmured, standing up and taking the cylinder out of his pouch to look at it again. "Things like this always happened to the ancient heroes. They even flew among the stars—huh! That's a likely tale! But this . . .?"

Once again, as he had learned, he twisted the end of the cylinder. The other end glowed with a blue-green light.

Yorgh shook his head in wonder, and returned the object to his pouch. He went ahead at a relaxed but steady pace. In a few minutes, the sound of voices through the undergrowth brought his head up sharply. He went on, parting the bushes silently. Presently, he grinned as he peered out at a wide pool.

Five of the younger women were swimming or splashing in the shallows. Piles of wet clothing on the bank indicated the task that had brought them to this sheltered eddy in the creek. Yorgh looked hopefully for the red-gold tresses of Vaneen, the shapely—if too haughty—daughter of Chief Tefior, but vainly.

Let me see, he pondered, shall I be a clumsy kromp snorting through the trees, or a meat-eating ponadu?

Raising his hands to his mouth, he emitted a wailing cry that was the trademark of the only prowling killer on The World large enough to hunt a man. The splashing in the creek ceased immediately.

YORGH ducked his head lower and wailed again. For good measure, he added a few guttural coughs, as if the animal had scented game. The splashing resumed for a second amid low cries of alarm, then was replaced by the hasty pat-pat-pat of bare feet along the bank. Yorgh peered after the wetly gleaming figures, and doubled up with one hand firmly across his mouth.

Taking time only to refill his water-skin, he followed the trail along the creek at a good pace. Just as he sighted the outlines of tents through the thinning trees, a handful of hunters ran pell-mell up the trail toward him.

"Hold! What's this?" snapped Chief Tefior, raising his spear to halt those trotting behind him. His gray-streaked beard bristled as he eyed Yorgh suspiciously.

"Yorgh, your best hunter," answered Yorgh, casting his eyes modestly downward. "I would have returned last night, had not my wooly run off in a sandstorm."

"About you, I do not worry!" retorted Tefior, fingering the haft of his spear. "The

girls just ran into camp shrieking that a ponadu was stalking the woods."

"Panting, wide-eyed, and in all the glory of their rather damp tresses," added a dark young bowman named Kwint, hiding a grin behind his hand as he examined Yorgh's innocent features.

"I thought I heard something," admitted the latter.

"Come then, Father!" half-grown Puko urked. "You'll help, won't you, Yorgh? Here, take my spear!"

Yorgh was half-inclined to let them go. He liked the sort of joke that brewed a while, gaining savor, like the time last spring when he had the luck to knock a ponadu unconscious with the butt of his broken spear. He still dreamed of having another such inspiration as that which impelled him to tie a dead log to the creature's hind legs, and then lead a group of young hunters into that part of the woods on the way to their nightly courting.

They had been enraged at spending half the night up trees, not daring to venture down in the dark with only their bronze knives. But they had been unable to prove that Yorgh had done anything worse than run faster than they, and he had enjoyed a unique evening being wined and fed and listened to with respect due the only man present, while the others waited for the disgruntled beast to free itself and slink unhappily off.

Yes, it would be good fun to let them go on, but Yorgh could not think of a quick excuse to separate Puko from the band. The boy was his favorite, perhaps because he so admired Yorgh's feats of fun and strength, or perhaps because his brown eyes so resembled those of his older sister.

"Well, truthfully," said Yorgh, "having only a knife in my belt, I broke off a branch and yelled aloud to scare the slinking thing. I distinctly heard it run off up the creek."

Some stared at him; other glanced sidelong at each other.

Yorgh grinned good-naturedly, until he saw Tefior's scowl.

"Well," growled the chief, "I think we are too late to catch whatever it was, much as I would have liked to!"

Yorgh widened his eyes to their most innocent expression at the pointed emphasis

of the last phrase.

"You, Puko!" added Tefior. "Run back to camp ahead of us and find the fathers of those silly wenches. Tell them I said two or three are to go back with the girls to get the wash, and to smack their bottoms for going so far without even small bows!"

The tramp back to camp was made in silence, save for subdued snickering at the rear of the file, where Kwint and others whispered of the winter camp. The Sea People there still told stories of sea monsters, remembering the great, black, slippery thing that had been shot full of arrows and hauled up on the river bank before it was seen to be a kromp skin mounted on a frame of boughs. No one had admitted creating the "monster," but Kwint thought he knew the maker.

Despite Tefior's disapproving glare when Yorgh appeared before the chief's tent at suppertime, the customs of hospitality suffered no greater breach than that the tribal leader stamped off to inspect the picket line of wollies below the camp immediately after finishing his bowl of stew. Yorgh allowed Puko to shame Vaneen into offering a fourth helping, on grounds that he had not eaten during his desperate trek through the burning sands. He watched her move about the fire.

II

SHE wore a dress of blue wool, dyed and woven by the Sea People into finer material than was made by the Hunter tribe. It tended to cling as she moved; and once Yorgh considered complimenting her on the way it revealed the curve of her breast, but decided she might not laugh like some of the other girls.

"And then," he finished telling his story to Puko, "when the sand stopped blowing, I pulled myself out and came home."

"And the Old One is still there in his gully!" exclaimed the wide-eyed boy. "Will you take me out to see, Yorgh?"

"I doubt he will," said his sister, reaching out to place Yorgh's bowl with the others. "Yorgh will do no riding till he earns a new wolly. Moyt says he caught a saddled animal trotting out of the hills this morning, and that it belongs to him now."

"That Moyt!" Puko sprang up indignant-ly. "Why do you let him come to our fire, Vaneen? I have heard him say he courts you only because Tefior is chief."

"Moyt is a good hunter," retorted Vaneen, frowning, "and more trustworthy than some I could name. Maybe if Yorgh could borrow a bow, he could bring down a kromp tomorrow and earn a new wolly."

"He can borrow mine," cried Puko, "and I'll help him. Then he can make a new bow of the horns."

Vaneen laughed.

"Yorgh, naturally, would never have the bad luck to get a kromp without perfect horns. Well, anyway, he would be safer out of camp. Ahnee and some of the other girls are angry."

"With me?" demanded Yorgh. "I must stay and hear their complaints, since Moyt has already given me back my things. As I pointed out, my bow would be too strong for him to draw, especially with a broken arm."

"He has a broken arm?" cried Puko, leaping up in delight.

"Well, no. But he would have, had he not persuaded me to let go by turning temporarily honest."

Yorgh's laugh trailed off when Vaneen gave no sign of being amused, but Puko continued to crow for some minutes.

"Then we can go tomorrow," he said at last.

He sobered at the expression on Yorgh's face.

"Don't say it was just one of your stories, Yorgh! That the sand blew in till it filled the gully again!"

The big hunter nodded sadly.

"This morning, on the crest of the hills, I even climbed a tree to look back, but the sand is like waves of the sea."

The firelight glinted in Vaneen's hair as she laughed scornfully.

"You don't believe me?" he asked.

"There are over three hundred men, women, and children in the tribe," said the girl, stretching nonchalantly and smoothing the blue dress over her hips, "and even the tiniest babes in their mothers' arms will tell you that Yorgh seldom speaks in earnest!"

"That was unkind!" said Yorgh, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "But you

always were too proud to be considerate, as is common with beautiful women. Will you bet a kiss that I lie?"

"A hundred!" Vaneen waved a hand contemptuously. "And that is a bet I would not make lightly with an honest man!"

Yorgh fumbled in his pouch for the shiny metal stick and held it up. Puko watched eagerly.

"Well?" challenged Vaneen, watching him warily.

"As I told you, I picked up the thing that lay shining between the feet of the skeleton. After chasing the wolly, I found it still in my hand. Here is my proof!"

Vaneen peered at it suspiciously, being careful not to come too close to Yorgh.

"Where did you really get it?" she asked.

"Have you no ears, woman? I just now told you that—"

"It's one of your tricks," said Vaneen, putting the fire between them.

"Look, then!" said Yorgh. "Come around a little, so you can watch the stick against the dark."

She moved reluctantly, and Yorgh twisted the end of the metal cylinder. The other end suddenly glowed blue-green, bringing breathless exclamations from Puko and Vaneen.

With an air of mastery, Yorgh turned the light off and on several times before yielding to Puko's awed plea to be allowed to touch it. Even when the boy, at Yorgh's instructions, also worked the light, his sister remained dubious.

"Enough!" declared Yorgh, grinning in anticipation. "You questioned me once too often, Vaneen. Come here!"

He reached out one huge arm and swept her to him, but it suddenly seemed he had taken hold of an untamed wolly. A hard little elbow thudded into his stomach and he let go. That was his second mistake, he saw a second later as he staggered back with his left ear ringing from a man-sized slap.

Vaneen, with a swirl of blue skirt about her tanned knees, reached for the wood-pile. Yorgh changed his mind about grabbing her again to exact his "winnings" when he saw the billet of wood in her hand.

"Your sister is a poor loser," he told Puko, rubbing his ear tenderly.

"I don't know how you made it light

up," snapped Vaneen, "but as far as I'm concerned, you haven't proved anything yet!"

"Here, you try it!" offered Yorgh. "There is no trick."

"I don't want the thing. Put it back in your belt and go show it to the simple-minded!"

"All right," said Yorgh, with dignity. "Here—you may keep it, until you believe me."

He tossed the metal object to the ground at her feet.

"One hundred—remember!" he warned. "Or I'll tell every young hunter in the tribe that you are a cheat!"

He loved the way her eyes flashed at that, but did not let the sight bemuse him when the billet of wood came whipping across the fire at his head. He reached up one big hand and plucked it out of the air, to Puko's admiring grunt.

"Well, if that's the way you feel . . ." said Yorgh. "I'll go see just how angry Ahnee is with me. I believe you made that up, out of jealousy!"

He tossed the wood airily into the fire and walked away as Vaneen clenched her fists in wordless rage.

Which, in a woman, means she's really mad, he reflected.

He turned sharply into the shadows of the nearest tent, lest another length of wood come spinning past his ear to ruin the dignified impression he had left behind him. Then he made for the two-wheeled carts shared by the unmarried men, located his own tent bundle among the baggage, and made himself comfortable for the night.

THE next day, he rode out with Kwint, Puko, and two others. They headed toward where the kromp herd had been reported, hoping for horn trophies that might be traded to the Raydower tribe of the great mountains. As with the Sea People, the Hunters relied largely upon wool from their wollies for trading, but other items helped. The Raydowers were sometimes difficult to get along with because of their bent toward mysticism, but they made knives and buckles of hard bronze.

Toward noon, they brought down a loppa, a fleet animal smaller than a wolly

but excellent eating. Yorgh lost when they drew straws, and stayed to do the skinning as the others hunted back along a brook toward camp, having promised to send him the first cart. The plain thereabouts was dotted by clumps of thick brush, and Yorgh decided to have a steak after he had ridden over to the brook, two hundred yards away, to wash up. He got out his sparking stones from the mountains and made a fire.

He had just wiped his mouth on his wrist, careful not to soil the sleeves of his prized crimson tunic, when a drumming thunder rolled across the flatland. He leaped to his feet.

"Kromps!" he exclaimed.

It was the herd he had seen the day before. Something had aroused them, and they pounded across the grassland in a black mass studded with sweeping horns. They would go for miles, leaving a trail like a dozen tribes on the march with all their wagons.

They're heading for the brook, Yorgh thought. If they don't cross, but swing and follow it down to the creek and the camp—

He reached his grazing wolly in three bounds and vaulted into the saddle. The animal protested bleatingly at the impact.

As Yorgh grabbed the end of the guide rope he saw the frenzied kromps swerve away from the glint of water and turn parallel to the brook.

"Can't gain fast enough to ride ahead," he muttered. "Why in the name of the Three Moons do they act so scary, when every other thing on The World is scared of them?"

Reaching down from the saddle, he pulled up a handful of the long grass already turning brown from the summer rays of The Star. When he held it over the fire, it flared into ashes too quickly.

With one hand, Yorgh tore loose the cloak rolled at the back of his saddle; with the other he unslung the spear hanging down beside his mount's first pair of shoulders.

The cloak took fire and burned well as he forced the reluctant wolly into a dash for the brook. With fifty yards to spare, he crossed in front of the kromp herd and rode ahead of it.

Occasional branches of trees growing

along the brook whipped across his chest or face, but Yorgh hardly felt them. He was trying to judge how long his cloak would last. He slowed the wolly, which now displayed commendable willingness to run.

The kromp leading the side of the charge nearest the brook was a young bull whose rear pair of horns had not yet grown to sweep out and forward around the smaller pair. Yorgh hoped that he might not be as stubborn as an older specimen.

He held the flaming cloak out on the head of his spear as the animals came up with him.

The young bull snarled at him, almost like a ponadu. Kromps did not bleat like the loppas and wollies they resembled in many other ways.

Too mean, decided Yorgh. He doesn't like this, though!

The young bull edged away from the flame. A branch snapped across Yorgh's leading shoulder, and he almost lost his grip on the spear. Then he missed the rustle of the bushes, and realized that the herd had swerved very slightly away from the brook.

He waved his disintegrating cloak before the eyes of the young bull again, and was sure the direction of the charge shifted a bit more. The kromp rolled reddened eyes at him and snarled again.

Seeing that the last shreds of the cloak were slipping from the spearhead, Yorgh wiped them off across the muzzle of the beast, and let the kromp have a smart jab behind the second pair of legs as it passed him.

He started to pull up, but suddenly saw that he was not entirely in the clear. An old bull, lumbering among the dust to the rear, had veered wide of the herd and was outside Yorgh. It panted up alongside, and the hunter's wolly lost its head and tried to run with the kromp.

Yorgh gripped the point of the rough, battle-chipped horn that suddenly appeared beside his ribs, and leaned his weight upon it in hopes of guiding the bigger animal past. Then he caught a fleeting glimpse of a dense clump of scrub growth thrusting out from the vegetation screening the brook.

Before he could shift his weight, his wolly swerved to the right. Yorgh found

himself supported in the air by only a one-handed grip on the kromp's horn.

He let his feet bounce against the ground once, reaching for the horn with his other hand. Then the bull tossed his heavy head, and the man sailed high into the air.

TIME hung motionless for an instant, during which there floated to his ears the irritable sounds made by the kromp as it blundered at full speed through the brush.

Then Yorgh crashed into the dense thicket on his back, with a ripping and tearing of cloth and a loud yell as some thorny shrub raked his ribs. He thudded straight through to the ground, but with his speed fortunately reduced.

"By Kloto, by Lax, and by the seldom-seen Atrop of legend!" he swore. "And if The World has any more moons, by them too! I had done better to stand squarely in their path!"

He wiped blood from his left cheek and wriggled about until he thought all his clothing was free. The dark red tunic was shredded, and the heavier wool of his pants was gashed and torn.

He loosed a pronged burr from his beard, pulled out a long splinter lodged in the back of his right thigh, and squirmed through the undergrowth on hands and knees until he came to an open swath trampled straight through the hundred-foot clump.

The kromp bull had not permitted a little jungle to hinder him.

Yorgh pulled himself to his feet and limped back along the freshly made trail to the open. In the distance, he could hear the herd still stampeding. He hoped he had turned it enough so that the kromps' propensity for straight-line charges would cause them to miss the camp.

"Well, I'd better see to myself," he sighed. "Left on foot twice in three days! Some will have a good time with me over that. Ouch! That knee feels skinned."

He made his way to the brook, where he stripped and bathed. As the water stung them, he discovered nicks and scratches he had not known he had, but he felt better after dressing again.

He patched the worst slashes in his pants with a long thorn and a bit of vine, but the

proud crimson tunic was a tattered wreck. It fluttered on his shoulders as he walked out into the open again.

On the ground, his sharp eye noticed trampled splinters of wood.

"The spear!" he muttered. "Funny—I can't even remember when I dropped it."

He searched the area, and finally dug up the copper spearhead with the toe of his boot. He put it in his belt and walked out to his fire beside the carcass of the loppa, feeling fairly fit although he knew he would be stiff and sore the next day. His fire still smoldered, and he piled on some dry sticks.

As The Star drifted lower on the sky, he began to worry.

"Someone should have come for me by now," he told himself. "Unless—"

He finally banked the fire with turf and started out on foot for the junction of the brook and the creek. Walking made it seem quite a distance, and The Star was still lower, painting the eastern mountains gold and red, before he came in sight of the camp.

"Ho! It's still there!" he exclaimed in relief.

Someone had seen him, for when he had gone a little way further, a figure showed against the dark tents, walking toward Yorgh. He wondered where all the carts were.

He was still a quarter of a mile from camp when the lone figure met him. It was Kwint, and he had changed somewhat in the four hours or so since they had parted. He wore a discolored swelling beneath his left eye, over which he peered at Yorgh.

"You can't come back!" he said glumly.

"What?"

"Tefior sent me out to say they don't think your latest joke was funny. They won't let you come back."

"Joke? What do you talk of, man?" demanded Yorgh.

"I suppose you meant just a little scare with that stampede, but it passed right below camp—where the wollies were kept!"

Yorgh realized then why Kwint had walked out to meet him. The tribe's animals must have run their best as soon as the picket line went down, and it would take time to catch them.

He explained what had happened.

"Well . . . seeing the condition of you," admitted Kwint, examining the tattered giant before him, "I myself believe it was really that way. But you know, Yorgh, it is said of you—"

"That I seldom speak in earnest," Yorgh finished for him. "But I did what I could! Look at me! I am practically naked to the rays of The Star!"

Kwint was silent.

"Well, say something!" roared Yorgh.

The other kicked at the ground with the toe of his boot.

"Even so," he murmured, "it would be best to stay out a few days, till we can tell your side of it around. They wanted to kill you!"

"Kill me!" gasped Yorgh.

It was a rough life they led, with brawling and even wounds when tribes mingled, but the one strict taboo was that no human might kill another—at least, not completely. It was the law of all tribes, handed down with legends that they had come to The World from the stars and were once as numerous as the stars.

"I tried to quiet Moyt with my spear butt," said Kwint, "for he was talking for hanging; but he is almost as big as you and knocked me down, as you can see. Then the boy came charging out of his father's tent and pushed the cooking pot over on Moyt, for which Tefior beat him and tied him to the tent pole. And—this hurts me to say—the water wasn't even hot!"

"And they all believed it of me?" said Yorgh despondently.

"Not all. Vaneen, I must say, tried to speak for you with others of us. But we were few to the numbers whose saddles you have greased or whose girls you have frightened out of swimming holes. Besides, we can't find the wollies."

"So they sent you to tell me not to come back?"

"Yes. I tried to bring my bow and a quiver of arrows for you when I saw how things were, but Tefior had them taken away."

Yorgh's face flushed, and he tugged angrily at his beard.

"I will go in and knock the old man's jaw loose from his head!" he growled.

"Even if it does lose me all hope of his daughter. He has no right!"

In the end, however, Kwint dissuaded him. Yorgh was touched to find that his friend had brought his own cloak together with a bag of salt and a water-skin. They parted, and Yorgh trudged out to his fire again. On the way, he cut a tall, straight sapling by the brook, about two inches thick, which he trimmed with his knife as he walked.

III

AFTER uncovering the embers and building up the fire again, he rigged sticks to roast as much meat as he thought he could carry, and carved the end of the pole to fit his copper spearhead. The Star had set and it was nearly dark by the time he got the metal tip fitted on and secured with the narrow strip of leather that had bound Kwint's cloak.

With the alert senses of one who lives in the open, Yorgh looked up before the girl came within a hundred yards.

He watched wonderingly as she plodded out of the dusk and up to his fire. The flames put copper glints in her hair, like rays of The Star on water, but her features were set in a harsh expression.

"You walked out?" asked Yorgh cautiously.

Vaneen curled her lip at him.

"Thanks to *you*!" she said, and the "you" was like a blow.

"Some meat?" invited Yorgh, trying not to show his hurt.

"No."

He considered. On the whole, even putting the best possible interpretation on it, he did not think he could call the girl's visit friendly.

"They didn't chase you out too, did they?" he asked mildly.

"My father sent me!" she all but spat at him. "He found me with something of yours, and nothing would do but I must get the accursed thing out of camp to fling in your face before nightfall!"

She took her hand from the belt of the blue dress, and Yorgh saw the gleam of the metal stick from the desert.

"It's already dark," he said hastily.

Vaneen sneered and dropped the object at his feet. Yorgh showed no resentment, thinking that she was beautiful even with a sneer. He could think of any number of girls whose faces became twisted and ugly with anger, but not Vaneen.

"Are you going back?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think you ought to sit down and make yourself comfortable with a steak."

Vaneen glared at him.

"I can't sit down and be comfortable, if you must know!"

"Why not?"

"My father took a stick to me when he found out that thing belonged to you."

Yorgh peered at her, and saw that she did not joke.

"If Moyt hadn't been there to stop him, I probably couldn't have even walked out here. You made a fine, merry day, Yorgh!"

The hunter rested his chin on his hand and looked down at the aimless patterns he was tracing in the dust with the end of the metal cylinder.

Time had been, he reflected, that he would have thought it funny to hear of Vaneen's being turned upside down and having some of the haughtiness knocked out of her. Once, even, he might have felt sorry for her afterward, or been enraged at the thought of Moyt's being there to ogle—or, worse, to intercede.

At the moment, he merely felt weary and discouraged.

"As you like," he said, "but it's dark out there, and a long way back."

He drew a circle in the dust and sliced it into quarters. After a moment, Vaneen turned back to the fire from staring across the dark plain. The long grass looked light gray in the dim light of Kloto, largest of The World's three moons. Lax would not rise till early morning, and tiny Atropo was so seldom seen that walking in its "light" was proverbial.

"Here," said Yorgh, "you can have my cloak for a cushion."

Vaneen stared expressionlessly at the tatters of his fine red tunic, and he could not tell what she thought.

"I have my own," she said, and unslung it from the back of her belt.

She threw the cloak about her shoulders

and eased herself to the ground with just a hint of extra care.

Maybe the old fish did beat her, thought Yorgh. I'll pull his straggly beard for him one of these days!

He cut off a portion of juicy loppa meat for her, and placed Kwint's water-skin and salt between them. Then he went back to peeling the remaining bark from his crude spear.

He caught Vaneen watching him with her hand close to the small knife in her belt. Yorgh snorted.

"Go to sleep!" he said.

I can recall when she'd have needed a spear, Yorgh thought, but I just don't have any spirit tonight.

He rolled himself in his cloak and stretched out. Something dug into his ribs, and he found the metal cylinder under him.

YORGH held it up before his eyes a moment, and muttered a few obscenities. He could remember nothing but bad luck since the moment he had found it.

A twig snapping in the flames caught his attention. He hefted the metal instrument in his palm, then tossed it into the fire.

He slept better than he expected. Once or twice, instinct awakened him in time to replenish the fire.

The last time he awoke, he found himself already halfway to his feet in the mist of dawn as Vaneen's scream was choked off by a hairy hand slapped across her mouth.

Yorgh groped for his spear. All he could see, at first, were legs of wollies surrounding the fire.

The spear was not where he had left it; it was in the hands of a slim, black-bearded man in a fur cap who sat on the nearest wolly. He watched Vaneen's writhings with amused admiration, but kept one eye on Yorgh.

The big hunter sensed men behind him, and leaped forward. The dark man looked surprised, and slid backwards off his mount just in time to escape the clutch of Yorgh's big hands on his leg. Two bodies thudded into Yorgh from the rear, pinning him momentarily against the animal.

Then the wolly sidestepped and Yorgh reached around to grasp the men holding him.

Raydowers from the mountains, he thought, and swung them off balance, around in front of him, and together with a soggy crunch. Then he dropped them.

The man in the fur cap was just bouncing to his feet, the wolly having shuffled over his head. Yorgh snarled and drove at him, pulling out his bronze knife. More men came from behind, not in time to stop him, but in time for one to hang on his arm. The dark man swung the butt of the spear, and it cracked on the side of Yorgh's skull.

When he came to, all he could see was long, oily wool. He squirmed, and found that he was tied face down across a wolly. Someone was telling someone else to be careful about kicking dirt over the fire.

Twisting his head, Yorgh found that he could see the fire, and some of the mountain men sitting their wollies beyond it. Vaneen was among them, not bound, but looking disheveled and resentful.

"Ah, coming around?" asked a voice.

The legs of a wolly moved into Yorgh's sight.

"I am Ueln, of the Raydower tribe," said the man in the fur cap. "I didn't expect you back so soon. You have a hard head."

Yorgh looked up at him painfully and grunted.

"We are going over to the brook to water the wollies," said Ueln, "and to attend to other things before we start for the mountains. If you behave I will let you ride in the saddle."

"All right," said Yorgh, feeling he ought to make some answer to disguise the fact that he was not yet thinking very clearly.

"You promise not to try to ride away?"

"Where would I ride to?" grumbled the hunter.

As soon as he realized the explanation *that* remark would entail, he wished he had remained silent. Further questioning, however, was forestalled by a cry from the man at the fire.

He ran to Ueln, holding up a gleaming object.

"What's this?" asked the Raydower leader.

Yorgh grimaced, and let his head drop. "Keep it," he said. "I make you a gift of it."

Ueln hesitated. He moved his woolly forward a pace to call to Vaneen.

"It's his good luck charm," said the girl sourly.

"So?" Ueln hefted the metal cylinder in his hand thoughtfully. "What kind of luck has he been having?"

When no one answered him, Ueln leaned back, tossed a leg over the woolly's front shoulders, and slid gracefully to the ground as if to search the fire more thoroughly. Unfortunately, his foot landed upon a thick piece of dust-covered fat discarded from the roast of the night before.

Yorgh looked up to see the Raydower sitting on the ground with much the same expression as when the hunter had lunged at him. This time, he held the metal stick instead of Yorgh's spear.

After a moment, he climbed to his feet and looked around at his men. None of them laughed.

The dark man stepped over to Yorgh, and the latter felt the metal object thrust into the pouch on his belt before Ueln cut him loose so he could sit astride the saddle.

"I'll let you keep your precious charm," said the Raydower. "I like my questions answered by people, or things, I can see."

Although the mountains thrust far out into the grasslands at that point, it took the better part of the day to pass through the foothills. Yorgh soon found out why the band was in a hurry when Ueln admitted to him that the long strings of woolies led at the rear had been "found" on the plain.

"But what could we do?" asked the Raydower. "Jayn sent us out to see what you had worth trading or stealing."

"Jayn?"

"She is our chief, since her father died and she will not marry lest she lose the title to her husband."

"Couldn't you persuade her? You look like a man."

"I am her cousin," said Ueln stiffly.

"Oh," said Yorgh, and rode on in silence.

They rode out of a narrow pass to see cultivated fields in a long valley. Yorgh's eyes was caught by the village nearby. It was built of rock and had the most permanent look he had ever seen.

He dismounted stiffly when ordered, before one of the houses. Bruises unnoticed

after the kromp had tossed him had made themselves felt during the ride. Two of Ueln's riders pushed Yorgh through the open doorway on the heels of their leader.

They entered a hall evidently used for meals and other gatherings. From the smell of the flambeaux on the stone walls, Yorgh judged that the Raydowers traded with the Sea People for fish oil.

THEN he looked at the woman sitting in the big, carved chair on the dais along one wall. She was attended by several men, armed, and a few women who were very obviously chosen for being less beautiful.

She was dark of hair and eye, and bore a certain resemblance to Ueln. Yorgh thought she must be a year or two older than himself. Then, as he was led closer, he saw that it was more likely five.

Jayn swept Vaneen up and down with a cold glance, but let her frank stare linger on Yorgh's broad shoulders and golden beard. Ueln fidgeted impatiently.

"Is this what you were sent to get?" Jayn asked him.

Her voice was not as musical as Vaneen's, Yorgh reflected, but it had a husky undertone that promised much. He saw that she took great care with her person, as befitted her position. Her long robe was dark and cleverly sewn to boast of every curve of her handsome body. It was belted at the waist by a girdle of the polished, light-blue stones for which the mountain people were famous. Yorgh wondered if her lips were naturally as red as they appeared.

Ueln had been explaining why he had not liked to leave behind two who might talk, especially as one was a hunter who could have trailed him. Jayn shrugged.

"I will decide how well you have done, Ueln, when we have counted the woolies. As for this pair, I am not entirely displeased."

She rose and walked across the dais to look down on them. Following her glance, Yorgh saw that the blue dress which had looked so well on Vaneen two nights ago was much the worse for rough treatment. Jayn stared contemptuously at the rents in it.

"Well, girl," she asked, "what can you do to make yourself useful?"

Vaneen gave her back stare for stare, saying nothing. Jayn tapped a small foot impatiently. Then she said something to make the men behind her grin.

"Come, come!" she snapped. "Where would you earn your keep—in my kitchen, or in one of the buildings housing our young men?"

Right there, Yorgh decided, was where he would have reached up and struck her, had she been a man and speaking to him. Women, it seemed, were wiser, especially in judging each other.

"Your kitchen," said Vaneen evenly, but Yorgh knew that the day might come when Jayn would regret the affair.

So did the Raydower woman, apparently, for there was a hard look in her eye as she watched the girl led away. Then it softened as she turned to Yorgh.

"Untie him and clean him up, Ueln," she directed. "And get him something to wear in place of that awful rag. You had no need to be so rough with him."

Ueln bit his lip, glaring at the remnants of Yorgh's crimson tunic. He turned on his heel and stalked toward the stairs flanking the entrance.

One of the riders touched Yorgh's elbow, and he followed, seething undecidedly between the twin stings of being called ragged and of having it implied that a man the size of Ueln could have been rough with him.

He was led up one of the two flights of stone stairs which to him were a wonder, and to a small room with a straw-covered wooden bed. Ueln drew his knife and cut the cord on Yorgh's wrist.

"There's a pool along the trail a way," he said. "Tomorrow, you can swim and clean up in the morning with the other riders. I'll see if I can find a tunic big enough."

"I have nothing to give you for it," said Yorgh, unable to avoid feeling sorry for the man at being received so casually after his hard ride. "Unless you want to keep the knife you took from me as payment."

"Never mind," said Ueln. "You'll earn it before long, if I know Jayn."

"What do you mean?" asked Yorgh warily.

"She isn't a bad wench, in her way," Ueln muttered. "It's just that she tries so

hard to keep us all under her thumb because so many have been at her to marry. She would rather continue to be chief."

"I should think," suggested Yorgh, recalling the black hair and flashing eyes, "that one might be found who would wink at letting her keep the power."

"Well, yes . . . but she could never be sure," said Ueln. "Of course, if she married a man of another tribe—like you, for instance—it would make no difference. She would still rule, for he would be just a slave, with less rights than even the kitchen flunkies."

"So?" murmured Yorgh. "Still . . . just let her give me to choose between the kitchen and a house of her young women, and you will see a notable choice made, my friend!"

"Young women reside with their families," snapped Ueln.

He stared Yorgh up and down, his eyes black pools in the light cast by the flambeaux he carried.

"I admire your attitude," he sneered with heavy sarcasm. "Enjoy it while you can!"

He strode away down the hall, leaving Yorgh in the dark. The big hunter thought fleetingly of creeping quietly to the stairs, but a saner instinct convinced him that Ueln would not have left them unguarded.

He groped his way to the bed, found that a blanket had been left on the straw, and wrapped himself in it against the night chill of the mountains.

The next three days he spent "enjoying his attitude," as Ueln had bidden him. The Raydower gave him a tunic of dark blue which was only a trifle snug, having belonged to the old chief, and pants of gray Hunter wool. The tunic had a narrow fur collar. Bathed and refreshed, Yorgh regained some of his good nature with the new clothes.

He did not see Vaneen anywhere when he was invited to sit at the great table for meals and to entertain the black-haired Raydower ruler. With unusual insight, he decided that Jayn would probably not be pleased to hear him asking about the girl.

Instead, he told some of his stories, and at supper made Bold to yank a bench from under one of Jayn's discouraged suitors. .

IV

THE roar of laughter died as the fellow scrambled up from the stone floor with a snarl, but Jayn's husky voice cut across the silence to avert trouble.

She keeps a tight guide-rope, thought Yorgh, and tried to smooth things over by telling one of his stories.

He thought the company about the table seemed impressed at the tale of his latest adventure in the desert, but it might have been the flickering light of the torches.

"I think you must have taken that from an old legend," said Ueln. "We, too, have half-remembered stories of people who rode out from the shrine in self-moving wagons, in the old days when there were more men in The World."

"What shrine?" asked Yorgh, for it was a tale he had not heard, although he knew it was widely told of the Raydowers that they held mysterious beliefs.

"On the mountain top," said Ueln. "You might have seen it any morning when you went with us to swim—"

He stopped abruptly, and Yorgh was aware of a peculiar hush around the table. Then Jayn quickly asked him to describe again how the Hunters made their powerful horn bows famous for their loud twang and swift arrows, and how they got such strength without making them as long as the wooden ones of the mountain people.

Yorgh answered sketchily, not failing to notice Ueln shrug defiantly under the severe stares of several diners near him at the great table.

After the dinner, Jayn called upon some of her girls to sing. Since the procedure had been much the same on previous nights, Yorgh deliberately showed little enthusiasm until he found an opportunity to beg Jayn herself to sing for them.

The Raydower with the neatly curled brown mustache who had paid her this compliment on preceding evenings, as Yorgh had carefully noted, glared and muttered something about "nomad upstarts." Jayn smiled at Yorgh more warmly than he liked, but he had to admit to himself that she sang well.

The next morning, returning from the small lake in which the men swam, he asked

Ueln for permission to walk about the village.

"Jayn didn't act as if she would mind my seeing something of it," he jabbed the Raydower.

The latter grunted.

"I heard her whispering to you last night, after the singing, thank you," he growled. "She can be nice when she likes. Oh, all right! But don't let one of my riders catch you on the trail to the pass!"

Yorgh grinned and parted from the group to stroll through the narrow paths between the stone houses and their small gardens. After half an hour, by which time the heat of The Star was beginning to lend the alleys the least touch of fragrance, he had the outline of the village well in mind.

He strolled on casually, until he succeeded in coming up behind the shrubbery bordering the space in back of Jayn's big house. There he loitered for some time, until he saw a trio of kitchen maids carry out wooden buckets of dirty water. One of them wore a soiled and bedraggled blue dress.

Yorgh rustled the bushes hiding him. Vaneen looked sharply about, and he parted the branches an instant.

The girl said something to the other wenches, and they went inside, leaving her to empty the buckets. She carried one pair over toward Yorgh as if to water the shrubbery.

When these were empty, she brought the next pair closer, and stepped around the bush behind which he stood.

"How are you?" asked Yorgh, thinking that she looked like a fish-cleaning woman among the Sea People.

She stared hard at his fine new clothes, and scowled.

"Some people know how to wheedle the best side of the tent for themselves!" she said bitterly. "What did you do to get that pretty tunic from her?"

"Not what you would be jealous to think about," retorted Yorgh. "Yet," he added to tease her.

"You look funny in that fur collar," snapped Vaneen. "Does it have a copper ring under the fur—with a place to fasten on the chain?"

"Ueln gave it to me," said Yorgh, de-

ciding that it was time to smooth things over. "Listen—it may soon be time to get out of here. Do they lock you in at night?"

"No," said Vaneen. "They just told me what would happen to me if I went out on the streets at night, so I don't."

"Could you sneak out here tonight . . . say about the time Kloto sets?"

Vaneen peered hopefully at his expression, and nodded.

"I have thought of a place to run to," said Yorgh. "It might work."

The girl's brown eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Yorgh, if this is one of your stories—"

"Sssh!" he hushed her, slipping an arm about her shoulders. "You've been out too long already. Meet me tonight, here!"

He slipped back into the pathway and hurried off. Vaneen's tears made him uncomfortable and he tried hard not to feel guilty. She had been having a miserable time, no doubt, but had he any choice but to make himself pleasant to Jayn?

THAT evening he was careful to let himself be seen with Jayn whispering frequently in his ear during the story-telling. She was beginning to hint that he might like to stay in the village for good, but Yorgh's expressions suggested much more.

Later, after dark, he crept cautiously into the hall with a short length of bed slat tucked in his belt. He had not been allowed a knife except at meals. As he padded to the foot of the stone stairs, a shadow detached itself from the wall near the main door. Yorgh sensed rather than saw the spear that reached out a moment later to prod him just below the ribs.

"Sssh! Quietly!" he whispered. "Jayn expects me."

The guard grunted, but lowered his spear as if far from surprised. Before he could think the matter over further, Yorgh made a show of enlisting his aid.

"She teased by not saying which is her room," he claimed, snickering sheepishly. "She is having her joke with me because I said I would be man enough to find it."

"Such a joke is only the beginning, friend," the guard assured him. "Up the opposite stairs and to the end of the hall. Come, I will point the way."

"Slowly," pleaded Yorgh. "I don't see as well in the dark as you people."

He saw clearly enough, however, to note that the man wore only a woolen cap, with no leather to protect his head. Yorgh struck him a chopping blow with the piece of slat.

He caught the spear in one hand, though he almost fumbled it in the dark, and dropped his weapon as quietly as possible to catch the sagging body in his other arm.

I'd better store him out of the way, he thought, heaving the man onto his shoulder.

He crept back up the stairs with his burden, having one nervous moment when he opened the wrong door to the tune of several raucous snores. The sweat itched on his forehead by the time he got the door quietly closed and made sure the next was the one to his own room.

He left the guard comfortably bound, and gagged with a strip of blanket, and traversed the stairway for the third time, wearing a good bronze knife in his belt. Near the door, he groped about until he found the spear and his club. The latter he thrust again into his waistband.

The door made little noise, though it sounded to Yorgh like the bleating of a dozen wollies. Once in the dark street, he padded quickly around the corner of the building, moving with assurance gained from counting the steps in daylight. He left the spear in the grass there, lest it embarrass him later by rattling against something.

A hiss from the bushes halted him in his tracks, until Vaneen whispered his name.

"Good!" Yorgh whispered back, reaching out to touch her arm. "Are you cold? Then, let's move. Be very quiet till we get out of the village!"

He led the way through some of the narrower alleyways and they sneaked out of the sleeping village by way of someone's garden. When they had a little distance, Yorgh returned to the trail.

"Where are we going?" asked Vaneen.

"I saw the trail this morning, a little beyond the pond. It must lead to the shrine they talk of, up the mountain. I could see marks on the cliff like steps, when I looked through the trees."

"Oh! They talked about that shrine in the kitchen when they thought I wasn't

listening," volunteered the girl. "They said Ueln was wrong to mention it before you."

"Did they say what it is?"

"No, except that no one ever goes there, and the old stories say the Raydowers were set here to guard it."

"So no one goes there! Good! That's what I hoped for."

Yorgh set off briskly along the path, intent upon not missing the junction with the trail he wanted. Even so, in the dark, he would have gone past, had not a voice spoken out sharply.

"Who's there?"

Yorgh froze, so promptly that Vaneen bumped into him.

"Ueln," he answered with the first name that came to him.

Then he saw a darker patch move among the bushes.

Who'd have thought they'd be strict enough to keep a sentry on the trail? he thought.

"You lie!" charged the sentry, overcoming his hesitation. "You are twice Ueln's size—ah, I know you now, Hunter! Ho—Kansi!"

Yorgh drew his club and hurled it at where he thought the man's head would be. There was a smack of wood as the other instinctively raised the shaft of his spear before his face.

THEN Yorgh was upon him, bearing him savagely to the ground. One big hand seized the mountain man's throat. When he grabbed at it with both of his own, Yorgh's other fist rose and fell like a hammer.

The hunter stood up, listening. Then, stooping swiftly, he groped at the sentry's belt and handed the man's knife to Vaneen.

"We must move fast now," he warned her in an undertone. "I do not like the idea of this 'Kansi' he called to knowing where we are."

"I think someone shouted from the village also," whispered the girl.

"Come, then!" said Yorgh, and plunged into the entrance of the trail to the cliff.

Within a short distance, it became a steep grade. Yorgh prudently slowed to save their legs for the real climb ahead. A moment later, he congratulated himself for doing

this, for they came upon the other sentry leaning on his spear where the bushes opened to form a clearing at the foot of a stone stairway.

"Stay here!" Yorgh breathed with his lips touching Vaneen's ear. "I'll try to creep around behind him."

"I can do better than that," whispered the girl, pushing against his arm to force him behind a shrub.

Yorgh swore luridly to himself when he discovered that the plant was armed with sharp thorns the size of arrowheads, but it was too late to protest.

"Kansi . . ." called Vaneen softly.

The sentry straightened nervously and hissed, "Who is it?"

"Come and see," invited the girl, keeping her voice so low that it might have been any girl.

Kansi strode over with quick, worried steps, the picture of a man torn between opportunity and duty.

Yorgh's big fist shot out of the darkness to take him behind the ear with a solid thunk! He went down without a sound.

Back in the village, there were symptoms of a growing hue and cry. Torches began to move out along the trail.

"Hurry!" said Yorgh.

"What will you do when we reach the top?" asked Vaneen.

"That I will tell you when I see what is there. Perhaps, if we are in possession of their precious shrine, they will think twice before egging us on to destroy it!"

The steps led upward, then doubled back around a narrow turn to rise further. They were on the fourth such flight and still almost directly above the trail when the first Raydowers set up a howl of rage at discovering the unconscious sentries.

"Yorgh!" shouted a voice that sounded like Ueln's. "Come down! This is no joking matter!"

Yorgh reached back an arm to sweep Vaneen close to the rock out of which the steps were cut, and kept climbing. He guessed that they were more than a hundred feet up.

Then, they turned onto a flight that stretched upward without a landing as far as they had already come, and curled past a corner of the cliff out of sight.

Some bowman below, with the eyes of a night-roaming ponadu, caught sight of the fleeing pair at a place where the stairway narrowed to a mere two feet. It seemed to Yorgh that a section of rock must have been broken away by a fall of stone from above, but he put aside his speculation as an arrow hissed up from below and snapped against the face of the cliff less than ten feet ahead.

"They're coming up the steps too!" Vaneen reported breathlessly.

"Hurry!" urged Yorgh, grabbing her hand. "They seem to think we're breaking a greater taboo than killing!"

He heard more twanging of bows below, but only two more arrows came close. Then they were past the narrow spot and protected by the bulge of rock around which the steps curved.

Yorgh groaned when he looked ahead.

"Have they been guarding steps that lead only to a place to jump from?"

Then he saw the dark hole in the rock where the stone footway ended.

"A cave!" gasped Vaneen. "Yorgh, must we go in?"

Little liking the idea himself, he said nothing. His exploring fingers found that the walls, near the entrance at least, were curiously smooth. He edged into the blackness, groping ahead cautiously. Guiding Vaneen's hand to a grip on his belt, he drew the bronze knife and held it—blade upward and ready—in his right hand.

About thirty feet straight into the mountain, he tripped.

"May the Three Moons sink into the sea!" he growled as he felt about in the dark. "More steps!"

"They're coming," said Vaneen.

"I know it," snapped Yorgh, wondering how patient a man had to be in the face of eating a sheaf of arrows.

Then it occurred to him that it would probably be worse for the girl if they were caught, and he decided that she was being reasonably patient too.

There were three short flights of steps, leading to a short corridor only a few feet wide. This ended in a blank wall, as Yorgh discovered by bumping his head against it.

As his exploring hands reached out on all sides and confirmed that the passage was squared off to a dead end, he growled

a particularly obscene oath he had heard among the Sea People. Then he hesitated.

"Vaneen," he whispered, "can you see anything?"

"Where?" came her whisper over his shoulder. Then he heard her gasp. "Oh, Yorgh, it doesn't look solid! I can see shadows!"

"It must be some kind of door," Yorgh declared. "If I only had a light! There's some kind of round bump but I can't find any handle."

He threw his weight against the smooth surface but it did not even quiver.

"Well," said Yorgh, "I was tired of letting that rabble chase me anyway."

It bothered him, however, not to know what had trapped him, what sort of barrier it was.

I wonder if I could see by sparks from my fire stones? he thought.

He sheathed his knife and thrust a hand into the pouch at his belt. His fingers touched something long and metallic.

Of course! he told himself. Although it probably won't work now that I need it!

He pulled out the metal cylinder and twisted at the ends. As he located the right one, the blue-green light flared out, brilliant to eyes adjusted to the blackness.

"It is a door!" Vaneen breathed. "Look, Yorgh! You can see through—"

She stopped as the door slowly swung open.

V

YORGH held the light in his left hand and dropped the other to the hilt of his knife, straining to see who or what was opening the door.

Then he decided to thrash that matter out on the inside and twisted the light off to avoid making himself a target.

He stepped forward . . . and smashed into the closing door.

At first, he thought someone had hit him. Then he heard the tiny click as the door shut.

"There are torches below the steps!" Vaneen warned.

Yorgh twisted the light on again, and held it out so he could examine the door closely. He saw the blue-green rays reflected

from the small, round bump on the portal, which immediately swung open again.

This time, Yorgh charged ahead without waiting. Vaneen was on his heels. As they passed the door, and their bodies shielded the light in his hand, it swung back and clicked shut again. They were alone in a large, shadowy chamber.

"Look!" Vaneen said.

He turned and found he could see the rest of the corridor plainly through the door, lit by the reflection of torches. It grew brighter as a young Raydower thrust a light and his head cautiously above the level of the floor.

Yorgh twisted the light off and drew Vaneen to one side.

"You know," he whispered, "when one follows a loppa trail to a waterhole, and finds only ponadu tracks going away, one asks no questions as to exactly how it came about. If they do not have a little light like mine, I think they will not get past that door."

It turned out that he was right.

The voices outside were almost inaudible, but the torch light shone in the corridor. Someone finally laid the palm of a sweating hand against the door. When he found that he could not push it open he quickly retreated.

After a while Yorgh peeped out in time to see the last of the pursuers descending the steps. Then it was dark again.

"I can see the stars," murmured Vaneen.

Yorgh looked up. It was true.

"And, Yorgh . . .?"

"Yes?" he asked, feeling light of heart at having succeeded in escaping the Raydowers for the time being.

"I . . . am beginning to believe your story about finding the metal stick in the desert. I'm sorry I said what I did."

Yorgh chuckled and reached out for her in the dark. He pulled her to him and found her soft lips with his. After the first instant, she slipped strong young arms about his waist and strained her body against his.

"That's ninety-nine you owe me," said Yorgh, taking a deep breath.

Vaneen pretended to pull back from him, with a low laugh.

Abruptly, following a quiet click, the

place was flooded by a white glare that was like a blow on his eyes. When he could see again, they were still the only ones there . . . except for a skeleton on a couch across the wide, cluttered chamber . . . and another on the floor beside a long table with many drawers.

"What is it?" gasped Yorgh.

"I don't know. My shoulder touched something on the wall beside the door, and—"

The place was filled with strange furnishings. Some were wooden and seemed to sag here and there; most were queer things of metal. Overhead, a transparent roof offered a good view of the stars.

Cautiously, with Vaneen crowding close, Yorgh walked around the chamber. There were other doors, and he tried his light at one of them. It obediently swung open to reveal what must have been sleeping quarters. Yorgh saw more bones, and let the door close again.

It was Vaneen who discovered the books. The writing and pictures on the smooth, pliable pages put to shame the few parchment records they had seen in the village of the Sea People.

Yorgh never remembered how many awed hours they spent looking at the strange instruments and colored maps and other curiosities. The sky, he did recall later, was showing light when he made his little mistake.

"This must be a place of the Old Ones of the legends," Vaneen was murmuring as Yorgh fingered a series of little studs on one of the machines.

Suddenly, there was whirring motion under his hand. He leaped back, startled. A humming grew from nowhere, followed by a scratching sound that culminated in a loud snap.

A tired voice spoke, sounding so near and natural that Yorgh dropped a hand to his knife and looked about.

"World Four of the Kithgol planetary system reporting on the hundred and sixty-first day of the plague. Urgently request the dropping of medical supplies detailed in last report, but advise against any attempt to land here. The plague is still uncontrollable, even animals, with few exceptions, being wiped out.

"Little hope for survival of this colony. Personnel of this station remain in strict quarantine, and will not venture out to mingle with other colonists in hopes of maintaining communication to the last . . ."

There was more, but Yorgh was satisfied.

He backed away from the talking thing, and saw that Vaneen's face was as white as his own felt.

"Let's go down again," he whispered through dry lips. "It's getting light."

He would have accepted a look of scorn for such a weak excuse, but the girl followed meekly. The door opened as soon as he got his light within a yard of it, and they crept guiltily down the stairs cut out of solid rock.

THERE were no Raydowers about until Yorgh and Vaneen came wearily down the last flight of steps on the face of the cliff. Jayn was waiting there in the little clearing, with Ueln and a crowd of villagers, spearmen prominently to the fore.

"The spirits let you return!" murmured Jayn, her face strained and pale.

There was a general air of shrinking back among the crowd, although Yorgh did not see anyone actually move his feet.

"I swear," said Ueln, "that they must have been all the way inside the shrine. I followed right to the Portal!"

"That is true enough," said Yorgh, waiting a few steps up to see what they would do.

He wondered if he could impress them with his light. He held it in his hands.

"Then, the sooner you go, the better!" said Jayn bitterly. "If the spirits let you go, we may not touch you. But I do not care to keep you around until you bring certain disaster upon the village."

An old woman whispered in her ear, and she looked sharply at Vaneen.

"And you took the girl with you?" she demanded.

"Of course," he replied. "And if you are really anxious to have us gone, I think you should give us wollies to ride."

"You can have all the animals my cousin took from the flatland!" she snapped. "But first, another matter!"

An old man was pushed to the forefront

of the crowd. He smoothed his white beard nervously and peered up at Yorgh and Vaneen with faded, short-sighted eyes.

Abruptly, he found his voice, and rattled off a brief, chanting patter. Then he stepped back behind a spearman who looked to Yorgh as if he would be poor protection.

"What was that, a curse?" demanded the Hunter, having had difficulty understanding the rapid words mumbled from the old man's toothless mouth.

To force an answer, he twisted the metal cylinder to flash the light at them.

"No," gulped Jayn, her eyes riveted upon the object in his hands. "He married you. It's the only thing that might possibly lessen the sacrilege. You were up there a long time."

She looked up at him bitterly.

"Oh, Yorgh! Why did you have to take that wench with you?"

Vaneen, who had been so quiet behind his shoulder, spoke at last.

"And I didn't even give him a tunic with a fur collar," she said.

Jayn flushed, then paled as she bit her red lower lip; and Yorgh saw that the comment must have struck a deeper wound than could days of kitchen drudgery.

He didn't know what to say; but his silence must have seemed threatening, for Ueln spoke up.

"I will ride after him, and make plain to his people how we brought him and the girl to the mountains," he offered.

"A good idea!" said Jayn, with an undertone in her voice that made Yorgh think of a cornered ponadu. "Just to be safe, and to make sure they take him back, we'll all go!"

Yorgh and Vaneen glanced at each other, but soon found that the Raydowers were in earnest. Before noon, they found themselves leading the hastily assembled column from the village out onto the grassy plain beyond the foothills.

There, another surprise waited them.

The Hunters, mostly on foot, save for a dozen on half-tamed wollies, met them at the first clump of trees, where some of their dark tents were pitched.

"We were just about to follow your trail in," cried Kwint, riding up to Yorgh with a grin splitting his features. "Do I see our run-away wollies being herded along there?"

"You do," said Yorgh, conscious that Ueln had pulled up beside him, looking glum. "This is Ueln of the Raydowers. He . . . caught them for us."

Kwint looked hard at both of them, but held his peace. Vaneen had ridden straight to her father.

"I gave the metal stick to Yorgh as you told me, Father," she said, staring him levelly between the eyes. "I hope you have no more such errands."

She slipped down from her mount, and headed for their tent.

"She's tired," said Yorgh to Puko, whom he found at his knee.

Tefior looked about weakly, and finally thought to close his mouth.

"The least you could do," Yorgh told him, "is to offer our friends here meat, to show there are no grudges."

Tefior licked his lips and began to give orders, but there was a puzzled frown on his brow.

Anyone but me, thought Yorgh, grinning, he would ask, but he is timid of the answers I might give him.

Things went very well after that. With the returned wollies, it was easy to move back to the camp at the creek, where the Hunters had left their carts and most of their baggage. The Raydowers willingly traveled with them, and were loaned tents to set up a camp of their own.

For eleven days, the tribes camped there, exchanging feasts, hunting together, and finding things to trade. Yorgh was gratified at how his advice was accepted by both sides, even though in fear by one of them. The Raydowers looked uneasy whenever he casually talked of traveling back with them.

There was only one untoward incident, which was quickly hushed up. As Yorgh was told the tale, Vaneen had taken Jayn to swim in the secluded bend of the creek. Somehow or other it happened that only the Hunter girl had dressed when she shrieked that she heard a ponadu in the woods.

Yorgh remembered the way Jayn's dark robes had fitted over the hips, and wished he had been there to see. Then he thought of her kitchen in the mountain village, and said no more on the subject.

When some of the Raydowers became

friendly enough to talk, however, the story of his escapade with Vaneen got around.

Yorgh caught people glancing askance at him every time he turned around. He went to old Tefior.

"I suppose you have heard it all," he said. "If you do not think it best, I won't come to your fire to see Vaneen."

The chief looked over Yorgh's shoulder. "Perhaps . . . for the time being . . ."

Don't know why I took that for an answer, thought Yorgh, staring across the flatland the next morning at dawn. Suppose I tell him the Raydowers call us married? Would he just say their law doesn't count? Vaneen looks kindly at me from a distance, but she hasn't spoken.

He chewed moodily on a blade of grass, thinking that he heard a distant herd of kromp moving.

Then his head jerked up as a great flame ripped across the sky.

VI

THERE were shouts behind him in the camp, and he saw motion about the borrowed tents of the Raydowers.

A huge, gleaming thing sank down to the plain on a cushion of smoke and flame. The fires disappeared as it touched ground. A moment later, the thunder died out.

Yorgh became aware of someone yanking his arm.

"Come on!" yelled little Puko. "I have a wolli for you. You can flee to the mountains!"

Yorgh looked around, and most of the talk and bustle ceased. People, finding themselves still alive, stopped to stare at Yorgh. He saw a group hurrying over from the Raydower camp.

Why don't they look to Tefior or Jayn? he wondered peevishly.

The first words Jayn spoke when she panted up with Ueln and others of her people were, "You were wrong to go up there!"

"I do not think well of it," Tefior agreed sadly.

"This is what comes of violating the shrine!" shouted one of the Raydowers. "The spirits of the Old Ones have come to avenge themselves upon us all!"

"No!" roared Yorgh.

He stared around at them, then out across the plain where the great, gleaming thing stood upright with wisps of smoke curling up from the grass at its base.

"I brought it upon us; I will go!"

Jayn and Ueln stared at him with pale, sorrowful faces. Kwint fingered his bow, and seemed about to step forward. Puko did, but Tefior grabbed him by the hair.

Yorgh turned and walked slowly away.

"Yorgh! Wait!"

Vanen ran after him.

"We'll go together! I was there with you!"

"No!" he groaned. "Jayn, she went because I took her. Kwint! Ueln! Hold her!"

He broke away and ran toward the thing on the plain, not thinking, not even hoping. The voices behind him died away.

After he had covered a quarter of a mile, he noticed that the metal thing was like the ships of the Sea People in some ways. It was rounded, like a hull, and its upthrust bow—

To his amazement, there were four men standing under it when he arrived. Yorgh gaped at their queer clothes.

"Well, look at him!" said one of them with a strange accent. "Is that what's been sending out a repetitive message that's well over two hundred years old? I thought the plague wiped this planet clean."

"Man!" exclaimed the one with the close-cropped red hair. "If we can find out why not, maybe we can stop it wherever it still pops up in the galaxy!"

It was late afternoon when Yorgh ambled back into camp.

A great sigh went up from the waiting groups when they saw that he was smiling.

"They are men!" he shouted. "Sons of the Old Ones—as are we! Tefior, Jayn, when I have told you, this will be a night for a feast!"

He told them of the strange men who said they came from the Terran Colonial Patrol in answer to a message from The World, which had long been shunned as a dead colony, dead of a plague still known among the stars.

He told how the Terrans had taken blood from his arm and looked at it in a queer machine, whereupon they had grown talka-

tive and excited.

"They said they will send people to teach us the forgotten ways of the Old Ones, because we are the first they have found who do not die of the sickness," he concluded. "Just for bringing them kromps and other animals to help cure the sickness, they will see that we have all we need to stand beside them, as brothers."

And he told how one of the Terrans had knocked a kromp unconscious with a small machine in his hand, to get some of its blood.

"I will show you," he grinned, thinking of a tremendous joke. "Where is Moyt?"

The others pushed the tall, blond Moyt forward.

"Is there any reason why you would not like to marry Jayn, who is the first of the Raydower women?" Yorgh asked.

"I—" began Moyt suspiciously, and stiffened as Yorgh pressed the trigger of the Terran stunner he held inside his tunic.

Moyt got control of his knees and straightened up as Yorgh turned off the power.

He started to open his mouth angrily, and Yorgh stunned him again. Moyt slumped to his knees beside Jayn.

The Raydower woman's lips curved in a thoughtful smile, and she reached out to run a finger through Moyt's hair. The man had changed his mind about protesting by the time the second shock had worn off.

Then Yorgh sat down to answer question after question while preparations for the night's feast went on. The men gathered and voted that messengers should be sent to the Sea People to tell of what had happened. Someone shouted Yorgh's name to be chief of the three tribes, and the cry was taken up over his protests.

"Well, I'll take a walk and think about it," he said finally, and strolled up the creek for a breather.

In the quiet of the trees, he shook his head to see if he would wake from the dream, but the only result was that he heard voices.

He lengthened his stride and caught up with a group of the young women.

"Where are you going?" he asked amiably.

"We were going swimming before the

feast," answered pert Ahnee, "but if there is to be a ponadu named Yorgh in the woods—"

"I won't bother you," he grinned, "if you will tell me where Vaneen is."

"She went ahead alone when we stopped to hear what all the shouting was for. She is anxious to try the new dress of white wool that Jayn gave her."

"Oh," said Yorgh, wrinkling his brow. "Well, in that case, I must ask you girls to find another part of the creek."

"What!" cried Ahnee. "Yorgh, you oughtn't!"

The Raydower elder said a marriage spell over us, didn't he? Now, will you go,

or must I show you what happened to Moyt?"

"We'll go!" squealed Ahnee hastily, as the other girls faded back from beside her. "But it was said that you did not mean to hold her to that foreign ceremony."

"I must obey everyone's laws," said Yorgh, "now that I am to be chief of all the tribes."

He thought he heard splashing a little way up the creek, and grinned to himself at the vision in his mind.

"But it is well known that you told Tefior—"

"Argh!" said Yorgh. "It is well known that I seldom speak in earnest!"



"Lend me a hand"

**FIGHT
INFANTILE
PARALYSIS**

JOIN ^{the} MARCH OF DIMES

THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR INFANTILE PARALYSIS

(Continued from page 3)

life that reminded her of our months overseas on Pacific island paradises not quite so loaded with alien and multi-legged life-forms! MONSTER rides the number two spot, and M'Intosh took third easily with VENUS MISSION, a horror story that kept me guessing all the way. The Grays apparently could teach the Apaches and the Riffs a few things about the processing of prisoners of war!

The rest of PLANET was good, as usual, with nods going to Jack Vance for the TEMPLE OF HAN story (though "Han" brought up another connotation to me, after my many crossings of the Han River in Korea during the past year) and Dave Dryfoos for SIGN OF LIFE, which depicted Venus as few writers now do, but in the true Chesley Bonestell style nevertheless.

Ross Rocklyne and Frank Belknap Long, old-timers in Stf that they both are, with stories in *Astounding* and other mags dating back to the early 30s, were somehow disappointing. I expected more than the standard kind of space-opera from those gentlemen, for some reason or other.

My vote for the best letters in July's VIZIGRAPH goes to, in this order, Keran O'Brien, J. W. Leake, and A. Zelitch. I didn't get to read the letter written by the much-maligned Mr. Dennis Strong, which apparently ripped into the teen-age mentalities boasted by some of your readers in no uncertain terms. I'd most probably have highly applauded Mr. Strong for his efforts to rid PLANET of these juvenile droolings, however, had I been back in the States in time to get that issue of the magazine, since I certainly approve of any move to glean from your pages such trash as that you so frequently publish from the pens of Chad Oliver (gad, a fellow Texan, too!), etc., etc.

One complaint about James Blish's well-written and exciting BLACKOUT IN CYGNI. Once again our hero has to get sick and heave all over the place at the sight of a little blood. I quote from the Hamlet-scene finale: "*Ptsiirr-tchh!* Jason dropped the blaster. . . . Blood cascaded down the front of his jacket. A half-inch of shiv-blade protruded from his Adam's apple; it had nearly taken his head off. Dirk retched. . . ."

Believe it or not, Mr. Blish, a man has to see plenty of blood before he gets sick enough to throw up. My platoon in Korea faced gooks with heads blown completely off—saw gooks, in fact, blown up and made part of the permanent shoulders of the roads near Inje—killed numbers of the little men with knives, bayonets and grenades in Seoul, at Hagaru-ri, and driving north from Hoengsong to Hongchon to Chunchon to Yanggu to Inje during the nine months I was recently there with the 1st Marine Division.

I've not seen anybody throw up yet, and I've seen many a man open a can of C's and start eating with a sprawled body maybe a yard or so to one side. Come to think of it, I didn't see anyone heaving on Iwo Jima either, which, as I recall, was a rather bloody little affair. Maybe our modern Marines are tougher than the Space OSS boys of the future. Or maybe Mr. Blish has a tender stomach himself!

Regards,

1st Lt. J. M. BIRDWELL, USMC

OPEN THE DOOR, RALPH

3401 Sophia Way
Sacramento, California.

Dear Mister Robot:

I have always had the urge to write into your fine magazine but lacked a certain push. Today the push

came. In fact, it is just outside my locked door right now trying to find a way in!

"What is it?" you ask. Well, I'm not so sure myself, you see, it just landed in a fantastic spherical space ship in our backyard two hours ago, incidentally, ruining the lawn!

Oh well, on with the dirt before the Thing gets me.

The VIZIGRAPH is wonderful, what with all those intellectuals writing in. And I particularly enjoyed your comment on the letter of E. M. Johnston's in the September issue. Cute.

The illustrations in P. S. are superb! I especially liked those that went with SLAVE-SHIP TO ANDRIGO and VENUS MISSION, in the July issue. In turn, the stories that went with the illustrations were quite good.

I waited in breathless anticipation for the September copy and when it finally came, I was a little disappointed in the stories except for LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS and THE INHABITED MEN. Also I. . . .

Please excuse me, the Thing is making more progress on the door than I was led to believe. What can I do? Ah, I have it, I'll stack all of my Stf magazines in front of it, that'll fix 'im!

Fanatically yours,

RALPH RONALD RAMSEY
(Rex Multi Bulli)

GET DIGGIN', FAN

2367 Wolcott
San Diego, California

Dear Ed.:

I would be very grateful if you could put this in your letter column. Thank you.

I would like to buy all Bradbury yarns, be they in books, pocket books or mags. Just send me the names of the stories and price. I will also pay postage.

LARRY WALKER

BRADBURY BE PRAISED

P. O. Box 2835,
Dallas, Texas.

Dear Editor:

There is a letter in your September issue entitled "Bradbury Needs Growing" by Mary Wallace Corby. In my opinion it is Miss Corby who needs growing. Miss Corby bases her criticism of Bradbury on what she calls his "obsession" with death. If Bradbury is obsessed with death, then so has been every man, woman and child since the dawn of creation.

Death is certainly the most basic, deeply rooted fear of all the myriad fears which beset mankind. Death, either potential or actual, is a highly dramatic thing, and as such is story material. When Bradbury writes of death or the fear of death, he writes of something that strikes close to the heart of all of us, but some readers are such escapists that this sort of writing makes them uncomfortable.

Such a reader is afflicted with a juvenile mind. There was once another great writer who was "obsessed" with death, his works are read in every high school today. His name was Edgar Allen Poe!

Miss Corby needs to read more Bradbury. If she had ever read THE FIRE BALLOONS which is the most tenderly reverent religious story I have ever read, or THE ROCKET (both these stories appear in THE ILLUSTRATED MAN) she could never say that Bradbury believes "in the basic rottenness of mankind."

Rather, I think he writes of the superficial rottenness of mankind, and through his writing is trying

to help mankind find again the basic kindness and goodness and honesty and truth which is its true character.

Miss Corby is right in saying that human nature is constantly changing. That is what I think Bradbury is trying to tell us, that humanity still has a chance if human nature will change for the better. He wants people to turn off their television sets once in a while and read and talk to each other and do a little worthwhile living.

Bradbury is a great writer, one of the greatest of this generation, he is a courageous and sincere writer. He is a writer of many moods, but whatever he writes, whether a lovely poetic love story like YLLA, or a biting satire like THE CONCRETE MIXER, his work always rings true, every word, every sentence, every paragraph.

Sincerely,

MARILYN VENABLE

LETTER MOLD

Box 666,
Camrose, Alta., Canada.

Dear Ed:

Robots no less! My letter will probably be subjected to all sorts of rays; washed in a disinfectant, and finally translated into the Robot language. But why the disinfectant? The only germs on my letters are typhoid, black plague, diphtheria and small-pox. That's all.

In reference to September PLANET, I liked the cover very much. It was unusual to say the least. After carefully adjusting my bi-focals, I discovered way down at the bottom, the artist's signature. Could it be—? No on second thought—. Yes it is; It's ANDERSON! EEK.

As to the stories: I liked them all. Hear that Ed? I LIKED THEM ALL. Amazing isn't it for a fan to say a thing like that? Must have a brain tumor.

By the way, fellow fans, I know I gripped a lot about one Dennis Strong, but don't you think he's taken enough punishment? How about letting him go his sneaky way in peace fellows, instead of pieces? I think he's taken enough verbal punishment. Besides, he might be an old guy of 95 or so, and we must respect our elders you know.

Sin-cereally,

MAVIS HARTMAN
(The BEM of Distinction)

STILL PAGING MR. STRONG

816 Soledad Avenue,
Santa Barbara, California.

Dear Planet Editor:

Purpose of this letter is one, D. Strong, whose letter hardly aroused me until the next-to-last paragraph, wherein he proves his lack of good sense by calling my old chess companion, Rick Sneary, a "moronic snob."

The whole of wee Dennis' letter is an extremely obvious attempt to establish his own maturity, probably a reaction against his mother complex. It is the writing of a person who cannot possibly comprehend anything whatever of the real meaning of science-fiction. Dennis should take a look at a few letters of yore, for instance, those of Chad Oliver (now an author), the great Joe Kennedy, and, indeed, Rick Sneary.

He will probably never comprehend why those geniuses once wrote in the vein he calls "adolescent." If he had any imagination at all, he could at least

have constructed some sort of logical argument against this particular style of writing; evidently he is no creative thinker, but rather a snob himself, for he attempts to discredit fans by pointing out that they are "slightly lower middle-class," and makes a final effort at establishing supremacy by wildly shouting that he is a GOOD friend of Isaac Asimov!

Maybe he has forgotten that Beethoven was hardly born into nobility, nor George Washington Carver. And may I point out that it is the nature by definition of the average Normal to attempt to conform rather than deviate; no better qualification could be given of a person than an attempt to be different.

It is little Dennis who appears to be nauseatingly normal, with his stumbling attempts to use "intellectual" vocabulary, his naive conceptions of "Profound ideas," and artists. Let him tell me why he likes Bradbury, or anyone else for that matter. Let him demonstrate his "intelligent critical faculty," and let him explain why he still clings to the hoary idea that like or dislike of a work of art can be established on an empirical basis by anyone who is himself an artist.

It is the foul stench of the unimaginative low-brow that demands reasons for art appreciation when, being raised to a point of importance by democracy, they attempt to subordinate art by "discovering" its rules. Maybe Dennis doesn't know it, but the type of letter he criticizes has been going on for a long, long time, likely longer than he has been alive.

Fandom and science-fiction itself sprang forth from and could never have existed without the gigantic creative power which is evidenced in every page of VIZ. Other magazines have lately responded to the demand of the lesser masses, now Stif-conscious as it begins to penetrate their thick Dennis Strong-like skulls that the Earth is round and revolves in space around a star.

The result is that familiar terms like *Gba* (may he never perish) and Grulzak, and the rest of the world from which science-fiction sprang and from which it has always gained its inspiration, reside now only in the hallowed pages of PLANET.

There are embryo fans and there are pinnacles such as Sneary (and to pun on his name is of the lowest form of criticism); and anyone who has not gone through the stages of Fandom and who is unable to understand the meaning of the language of imagination is not a Fan, and never will be one. He is, rather, a corrupt intellectual, devoid of originality and invention, overwhelmed by the discovery that he can understand basic algebra, and confused by finding that the word "fiction" in "science-fiction" really means something. It is a mystery to me why Big 'n' Strong Dennis even reads PLANET at all, since he cannot hope to comprehend the mental projection inherent in real science-fiction, if he cannot comprehend the great lord Fan.

While I could write another ten pages on this particular phenomenon of normality sitting on its non-existent pedestal, I hardly consider it worth my while, since mediocrity such as that evidenced by not-so-Strong soon is absorbed back into the mass from whence it came.

May I say that PLANET is able to hold its own even against its semi-slick competitors; in fact, it is often much better. The roster of authors continues excellent, and the interior art work (Orban, no less! —and Cartier! shows evidence of a high degree of maturity, which means that Ye Editors understand the limitations and advantages of pulp reproduction ... which is more than can be said for other magazines in the field. Your covers are a little stagnant,

though, but excellent for Leigh Brackett, who is also stagnant... but we can't have everything!

INFORMATION FOR PLANET READERS: attention, Ken Beale. C. H. Liddell is also Kuttner-Padgett-Hastings-Hammond-O'Donnel-etc.

Sincerely,

S. VERNON MCDANIEL

SIX FOR ONE!

12 South Sixth Street,
Wilmington, N. C.

Dear Ed.:

I am writing this letter (my first to PLANET) in the hope that it will see the light of print. I have been reading every issue of PS for years, in fact all but the first two issues. I would love to obtain that first issue. Can anyone supply one reasonable. Will trade SIX mags (from '46) for it, or will buy.

I like short stories. Stick to them and I will stick out my cash every issue. Please don't get the "long-novel bug" that seems to have infected the other mags.

Sincerely,

BILL DEPPE

EVERYTHING WONDERFUL, ALMOST

9500-21st Ave., N.W.
Seattle 7, Washington

BUD:

Several hours ago a lady friend of mine called me up and told me that I had a letter printed in your mag. I promptly rushed out and bought a copy of the September issue of PLANET STORIES. I looked at it, found my letter, and promptly got 15 extra copies. That is why your sales jumped in this section this month. I will keep them and show them and show them to my grandchildren, that is if I ever get hitched.

Now I guess that I will take a look at the Sept. ish. of PLANET.

The VIZIGRAPH was, as usual, good; in fact I think that it was plenty good. There were a lot of plenty good letters this time. I think that this section has improved along with the rest of the mag.

Next I will tell about the art work. On the cover were a lot of pretty colors. Wow! Put the club down lady, I surrender. Pages four and five. Hot dog, more women. Page 35. Another wow. Sister if that neckline was cut any lower you could go into television. Page 44. What, no women? It's a crime. Page 50. Unless one of those BEMs is a girl I don't like it.

Page 57. I had to look hard but I found another woman. Page 67. Nice looking gun. Page. 71. My goodness you are slipping. Two straight pictures and no women. Another nice looking gun though. Page 71. Hmmm. Page 75. Faughh. Page 81. Poop poop. Page 85. Hot dog.

If you will excuse me I will now go and read the stories. That is if they are good enough to compete with the Seattle Rainers Baseball Club.

Well here goes. In the order of their appearance.

THE INCUBI OF PARALLEL X. I can't think of anything to say, but it sure was a good ball game. The story could have been good, but the author did a lousy job on this one.

LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS was good. It was well written, at least I thought it was.

SANCTUARY, OH ULLA. All I can say is, "Oh Ulla."

THE INHABITED MEN is another good one. Let's keep it up!

THE STAR FOOL. Hot Dog, good old Whaley.

LAST NIGHT OUT. Wonderful. Nice!

TYDOR'S GIFT. I knew how it was going to come out, but I liked it anyway.

THE WATCHERS. Keep looking. This was good also.

VENGEANCE ON MARS. My, my, how long is this going to keep up? Another good one.

HOSPITALITY. Plenty good.

I think that the only peer story in the whole string was the lead. That makes it three issues in a row.

PLANET is still tops with me.

Goom Buy,

JACK R. HOPKINS

WHAT, ONE FOR MR. STRONG?

Box 1648, University Station,
Austin, Texas.

Dear Sir:

My apologies for my delay in writing, but what with the pressure of school work (I'm trying to finish up my MA in anthropology) and all I only found out the other day that my humble missive had come in first in the PS sweepstakes. Hope my tardiness has not caused you any inconvenience.

Inasmuch as I have been writing professionally for some time now, I feel that it would be unfair of me to accept an illustration; I should have put a note to that effect on the letter. If it is okay with you, just let the other two winners have their choices and send any other illustration you may see fit to Mr. Dennis Strong, Kalas-Strong Publishing Co., 942 Scribner NW, Grand Rapids, Michigan, with my compliments.

Mr. Strong, you'll remember, wrote the somewhat acid note to PS that prompted my return to letter-writing in LA VIZI; I note, in a recent fanzine, that Mr. Strong has since changed his views. I think that takes a pretty big man, and would appreciate this opportunity to say so.

In passing, here's wishing you the very best of luck with PLANET STORIES. It was fun sounding off in the letter column again, and I hope that the awarding of the pic to Mr. Strong may serve some constructive purpose.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER

HAPKE FOR GREGOR

2711 La Salle Street,
Racine, Wisconsin.

Dear Ro-ro:

Ah-ha! Anderson's trying to put one over on us, is he. The idea—making a cover almost illustrate a story. What are you trying to do, Anderson, upset PLANET's glorious precedent? A PLANET cover NEVER illustrates a PLANET story. See that this incident does not reoccur!

Well, anyway, the contents page looks nice. Let's see what's behind it. You know, every so often you print a story which is so different or unusual or well-written that it stands out, not only as the superior story of its issue, but also as one of the few truly memorable tales that have appeared in PLANET STORIES.

Usually such a story is written by a well-known author, such as Bradbury with his MILLION YEAR PICNIC or Brown's STAR MOUSE, but occasionally this is achieved by a comparative newcomer. In my biased opinion Lee Gregor has done this with his LAST NIGHT OUT; it deserves the oft-used but

seldom-deserved title of "a classic." Congratulations Lee, on a fine story. I hope to read more of the same from you, and I wouldn't be surprised to see the story anthologized.

I enjoyed Sturgeon's novel but it just couldn't stand up to Gregor's gem. Likewise with Poul Anderson's LORD OF 998 SUNS (couple a novae—heh-heh), but it had some nice ideas. SANCTUARY, OH ULLA! was good too. In fact it was almost impossible to distinguish between these three stories, so-o-o I'll have to rate them tie for 2nd place, with perhaps SANCTUARY slightly lower than the others.

A rather good issue, dear Ed. The rest of the tales were fair, except one: A few issues ago I advised purloining Roger Dee's typewriter ribbon. Evidently this has *not* been done, or else Dee has secured another from the black market. Now, I shall not go so far as to state that Dee's stories produce a singularly disagreeable sensation in the olfactory regions; however, if any more atrocities of this type are perpetrated, I shall pour glue all over his typewriter keys.

Well, let's see what the dear old VIZI has to offer. For Don Lanoue's edification, "The Thing" is not PS; no sweet magazine, in spite of your covers and blurbs, even *you* could not fall quite *that* low. No, "The Thing" is: — — — A T-V COMMERCIAL!

Since the Strong logomachy is still barreling along, pardon me while I shed my coat and leap heartily behind the nearest barricade and throw spitballs at the contestants. Now, I don't know about the rest of you fanlings, but I write to and read the VIZIGRAPH for one reason. I enjoy it. Ye VIZI is sort of like a good, old-fashioned Irish Saturday night brawl: although the participants may get banged up a bit now and then, nobody stays permanently mad at anybody else and everyone has a helluva good time. This is something found in few other prozines.

I see that Mort Paley has implied that the acting in ROCKETSHIP-XM was better than that in DESTINATION MOON. Granted, the latter had little plot; however, as a fan whose second passion is theatrical work, and who has played in a number of college, summer theater, and other amateur theatrical productions, I believe I'm as well-qualified as anyone to state that on the whole the acting in DEST. MOON was better than in most movies (which may or may not be a compliment) and was certainly far above any emoting done in R'S-XM.

Cheerio, old poop,

BRUCE HAPKE

NEW BRADBURY MAG!

4458 56th Street,
San Diego 15, California.

Dear Sir:

Ray Bradbury is an ogre! He loathes all of mankind, considering them less than vermin under his feet. He glories in death. He hates all women, small children and cuddly animals. He is a depraved monster running amuck through the ranks of the innocent with fanged and bloody typewriter!

Oh, stuff and nonsense! When is this sort of thing going to stop?

May I intrude once again on these wild accusations with some *facts*? It seems that my discussion of Mr. Bradbury in the May issue of PLANET was not enlightening enough. Despite my somewhat lengthy explanation of Ray's philosophy I see that Miss Mary Wallace Corby has taken it upon herself to further criticize what she feels is "bad" about his work, his

use of death in stories. Now Miss Corby writes an intelligent letter and is no doubt sincere in her beliefs. But I am equally as sincere in my belief that she is presenting an unjust and distorted viewpoint regarding Bradbury's "obsession" with death, in the morbid and decayed sense of the word.

I think I am perhaps a little better able to judge Mr. Bradbury than Miss Corby since I am in possession of everything he has had in print (155 stories) and have talked to him at some length about his work and its underlying philosophy. In my previous letter I freely admitted that many (not ALL however) of Ray's tales are concerned with death. Bradbury is fascinated with the literary possibilities of death—as a basic and challenging theme around which a story or stories may be fashioned.

But, as the supporting brick is not the whole of the house neither is death the whole of Bradbury's fictional edifice. It is the misguided reader who insists on plucking it out of the overall scheme and spotlighting it as the center and main focal point of a Bradbury story.

The fear and experience of death, whether real or implied, brings to light the elemental and purest form of human emotions. As a creative artist sensitive to these unadorned emotions, Ray sees, in the cold reality of death, his best chance to capture humanity as it really is—when the torpid mask of lazy security is torn from it.

Many authors, are afraid to tackle so risky a theme, lacking the rare ability to handle it properly. Therefore, they skirt carefully around the edges and sneer back over their collective shoulders at an author who has the literary guts and power to use death as the structural basis for a series of stories.

Ray Bradbury does not, as his critics claim, write of death for death's sake. He relegates it the status of a framework around which he is better able to create its exact opposite—life! It takes a very talented writer to do this and a perceptive reader to understand and appreciate what is being attempted. As I have pointed out before—too many readers are able to see only the superficial Bradbury, not the real creative artist—and they are therefore quick to brand him immature and morbid.

And the ridiculous statement that Bradbury's work is "a symbol of his belief in the basic rottenness of mankind," is sheer poppycock! To meet Ray is to see that he loves people—all kinds and types of people—and he gets a whale of a kick out of simply being one of them. Certainly he is able to spot his own and his fellow man's weaknesses. Let us hope so! But his perception also embraces the strength and goodness of man as well.

Bland and smiling in appearance, Bradbury is a refreshing mixture of frankness and good humor—a fellow who wears crew-cuts and bow ties and likes most everything from baseball to the ballet. He consistently goes out of his way to cooperate with the fans and it really angers me when they return his kindness with slurs and digs at his literary personality. They don't actually know what they are talking about anyhow, and I have been figuring it is time they did.

Toward this end I am editing and assembling what I sincerely hope will be a milestone in amateur publications—THE RAY BRADBURY MAGAZINE. It will be the first of its type ever presented in the field of fantasy. For the benefit of those readers who want to know where and when Ray appeared in the "slicks" and other mediums (Radio and T-V) I have gotten together the first up-to-date index of his complete works. (*Fanscient* once ran a partial index in

'43.) In addition the issue will contain articles, satire, fiction, reviews, letters, etc., by and about Bradbury.

So any reader who is interested please drop me a penny postcard. When the issue is ready I will inform you of the price. Let's show Ray we are grateful for the fine job he is doing to promote adult fantasy among the magazines who have frowned upon it in the past. He has added new stature to the field and broken many editorial taboos.

My most sincere appreciation goes to PLANET for allowing me the space to reply, once and for all, to this Bradbury "death" business. And thanks, too, for letting me mention the RAY BRADBURY MAGAZINE.

Best of luck with PLANET,

WILLIAM F. NOLAN

TEXAS TELL-OFF

McAllen, Texas.

Dearest Sir:

Have just finished reading your September issue of PLANET STORIES and have congratulations to offer you for the stories and pictures.

I was only disgusted in one particular: that was by the blabbering of "mushmouths" Don Lanoue and John Davis. Advise them to come to Texas where all the civilized people live.

HOMER CUELLAR

ONE FOR THE HOUSE

1455 Townsend Avenue,
New York 52, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

Another September begun, and another issue of PLANET STORIES on the stands. Shamefacedly, I confess that I haven't yet read it. It isn't my habit to write letters to magazines without perusing anything but the letter columns, but I feel an odd urge to write to La Vizi right away, and am gratifying this desire lest I be beset by a horde of repressions, frustrations, and engrams.

Anderson, your perennial cover artist, seems to be under continual attack by the readers. The main trouble with his work is, I think, crudeness and hastiness. He certainly can do a fine job when he sets down to it (witness the cover of SCIENCE ADVENTURE BOOKS No. 1). And the eternal editorial requirement of hero, girlie, and BEM doesn't tend to enhance his covers.

The bulk of your interior artwork seems to have been taken up by Vestal, succeeding Mayan. Although their two styles are not alike, there is nevertheless a similarity between them. Both are good craftsmen in their medium and both do a good, workmanlike job.

But neither of them display much originality, sticking to the general concepts of stock apparatus, like spaceships, suits, etc. Yet I think Vestal could be a top sf artist if he tried to induce some freshness into his work. As it is, he has quite a good style, even if he does tend to repeat himself. (What am I rampaging like this for? I don't know anything about art). Every now and then, we see letters from readers who just can't understand why you run the VIZIGRAPH at all. (Or maybe you get torrents of them, but print one only occasionally, so as to save the feelings of the letterbacks and make them "us?" feel important).

These people can't seem to grasp the aspect that makes science-fiction magazines different from their pulpish brethren. That is, that most readers of sf feel an interest in the field which goes beyond read-

ing the stories. So even if they don't write into La Vizi themselves, they still read it to see what other readers have to say about the issues of PLANET or what have you, that they, too, have seen.

How can Lionel Meltzer say that PLANET has been in a year-long slump, and then criticize the space-opera type stories. I could understand Meltzer's viewpoint if he *liked* space-opera. But if he doesn't care for the Burroughs-type story, what's he beefing about? Recently PLANET has escaped from the kind of stories that read from beginning to end like the blurbs on the contents page.

During late 1950 and '51, many authors who never or seldom had written for PLANET, but were well-known elsewhere in the field, appeared on its pages. I only hope that the mag will stick to its present standards, if not actually improve.

I am growing sick and tired of people who write letters to you saying how intelligent they are because they never write letters to you.

No more reprints! Goody! But why no more Cartier?

Sincerely,

MORTON D. PALEY

A DAISY?

622 Hubbard Street,
Fayetteville, N. C.

Dear Editor:

Your mag gets better every issue, and your last one was a daisy... especially with Ted Sturgeon doing the lead novel. Let's see some more by Sturgeon and perhaps one by Henlein.

Very truly yours,

JOHNNY MACNEILL

MAY START TROUBLE

429 E. Angelena Avenue,
Burbank, California.

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of PLANET STORIES and other science-fiction magazines for several years, and naturally I developed into a first-class fan, although this is the first time I have ever felt compelled to write a letter about a story. I will get to that a little later.

I want to ask, what has become of Henry Hasse? I have liked some of his stuff pretty well, but I have not seen anything of his for a long time.

Of all the fine sf stories I have ever read none has ever affected me so strongly as one which appears in this September issue. It isn't very well written from a literary viewpoint, but it has a real sense of being alien. The story is, THE INHABITED MEN by Margaret St. Clair.

I have never read anything else of hers approaching this vein. Her stuff is usually rather trite—I almost said tripe. It made me speculate about her mind—how she gathered the germ for that story—what incubus it hatched from?

We take our science-fiction lightly, yet it makes one wonder. Maybe we are "property" after all, and some of us are able to receive impressions from parallel worlds. Have others thought her story strange and alien?

Thanks a lot for putting out a good magazine. You really try.

With sincere regards,

GRACE M. KAY

THANKS, DOC

Franklin Clinic,
Elizabethton, Tennessee.

Dear Sir:

I am not one who is given to the writing of fan letters. Indeed, this is not a fan letter, but rather an attempt to advise you of how much I appreciate the excellent magazine you are editing.

Your magazine is consistently good, with accomplished writers and plain-to-be-seen editorial talent.

I have been an avid reader of science-fiction for twenty years, and I have read your magazine since it was first published. I think I can truthfully say that I have never read a *bad* story in your magazine.

I have no favorite authors. I enjoy them all because you keep sloppy writers and bad plots *out*.

PLANET STORIES stands head and shoulders above them all. After a hard day's work there is no treat like cracking a volume of PLANET STORIES and journeying to J. J. III beyond the red nebula.

Please, let's have more "Id" stories; they were great.

Keep up the good work. Keep PLANET STORIES on top.

Yours truly,

L. W. CARPENTER, D. D. S.

WHY STF?

220 E. President
Tucson, Arizona

Dear Editor:

I shall make no attempt to praise or pan your magazine. It seems enough that I buy it as that action proves that it is acceptable to me.

Primarily this letter is written to those young readers like Carl Schemmerling whose letter appeared in your November issue. I find it somewhat astonishing that these younger fan read science fiction and do not know why they do so. Carl mentions other "better kinds" of fiction. My mind cannot comprehend any other "better kind" of literature, and other than the classics and an occasional historical novel I read the other types only when there is no science fiction lying around unread.

As a whole, science fiction readers are highly imaginative and have the so-called "open mind." They possess the ability to reason logically and the will to understand enough of basic science to fully appreciate the various elements which form science fiction.

While not a specialist in any particular science, the reader is normally interested in science from astronomy to zoology. He is interested in the past and future in science, government, and human relations. He progresses from the strictly fictional works through stages of semi-fact and technical works; thus learning to separate fact and fiction.

The science fiction reader stirs his mind with the stick of pleasant reading and his outlook on life is broadened. He gains an understanding of people and their problems, the problems of the future and the past. His mind is stimulated to think, one thought leading to another until he is an avid reader, retaining much, his learning potential increased.

One writer whose name I cannot recall mentioned that he never tried to hold back any ideas for future use. He stimulated his mind and forced ideas from it by using them as they came. The more he wrote the more he thought of to write.

In the same manner, the more we read the more we think. The more data our minds absorb, the more it is enabled to absorb. It would not be true to assume that we may learn a science or any complete scientific subject from science fiction but we may get the urge to learn and that is an important factor for

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an intelligent person. They wish to retain the incentive to learn and to increase their knowledge. The desire to learn increases the capacity for knowledge.

That, Carl, is why intelligent adults read science fiction.

However, the intelligent adult does not find anything attractive about lurid covers. They exist to attract new readers and to make the younger readers and some frustrated souls feel adult and perhaps a wee bit naughty. We read science fiction in pulps of necessity, the slicks not accepting the medium of science fiction so readily. Slick publications are expensive and science fiction does not have enough readers to support a slick publication.

Sincerely,

CLARK E. CROUCH

STF vs. BURWELL

1340 Vallecito Pl.
Carpinteria, Calif.

Dear Nothing:

I have just finished the November ish of your mag. I won't bother to review the stories because everybody else does that anyway. But that cover, UGGGG! That lurid blob of color is a cover? After seeing that THING, I can imagine what that guy Anderson sees in his dreams. Poor soul.

I don't have any gripes about stories that you run, but I think La Vizi is going to pot. That first letter was a dilly. This guy Burwell must be using your letter column as an emotional outlet for his opinions on Communism, racial prejudice and sabotage. What the hell do the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, Communism and bigotry have to do with STF?

Maybe he should have sent his letter to Washington or the F.B.I. I most certainly agree with his opinions on these affairs but they still have no place in a STF mag. In the mags I buy, I want to hear about science-fiction, not the sordid topics that reader Burwell chooses to write about.

Next, who is this self-styled author-illustrator named Tuning or Stien or something who chooses to contaminate the pages of La Vizi with a long-winded commentary on the merits and superbness of his "stories" which you so wisely refuse to print. Does that rotund little rascal really expect to get his gory little space-operas published by a mag with any respect for the collective sensitivity of the gastric organs of its readers? (That ain't a "nasty" word, Ed, ole Nothing.)

As for Tuning's so-called commentary on the art work in your mag, I can truthfully say without fear of contradiction that all he knows about art could be engraved on the head of a pin. In capitals, yet! In the future, please do not pollute your letter columns with such drivel as "Mr." Tuning writes.

Stefngly yours,

KEN SCORSO, The Jovial Jovian

DAY OF THE PHILCON

806 Oak Street
Runnemede, N. J.

Dear Editor:

I eagerly snatched up my issue of PLANET on its arrival yesterday and am now dispatching this air-mail letter very promptly for several reasons.

The first being that your lord-high editorship has put out a fine issue. Three surprise names on the contents page were Stanley Mullen (Is this his first appearance in magazine form?), *Sinister Barrier* Russell, and Mary Elizabeth Counselman, best known in *Weird Tales*. Was well-done.

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I think HALFTRIPPER was rather poorly done—not the story itself, but the premise on which it is based. I'm not doubting that fear of space will be a major headache when, but I object to the comparison between space cafard and seasickness. May I quote? "The fear of space cafard must be something similar to that of seasickness every new sailor had back in ancient days when man sailed the oceans of Terra. He never knew until he made his first voyage if he was going to be susceptible; and, if he turned out to be, it meant the sea wasn't for him." Now I. S. Q.—lots of sailors get seasick—almost anybody can get seasick. I'll bet even Sprague de Camp (who recently sailed for Europe) got seasick!

I see a reader complaining about 26 page novels. If we must stick strictly to definitions—a novel can be of any length, almost. So what if the contents page says "novel"—don't be so critical! I remember when PLANET has had two novels.

Here comes the main reason for writing, Mr. Editor, and if it is not possible to include this in the January issue of PLANET, don't print it at all. I'm hoping my promptness will help you.

November 11th is the day of the Philcon! Everyone around Philadelphia is invited to attend. These Philadelphia Conferences are always occasions to remember. Last year is a typical example: George O. Smith was master of ceremonies; Willy Ley spoke (as only Willy can) about his DRAGONS IN AMBER; Irv Heyne gave a hilarious talk involving mathematical equations; there was a panel discussion of The Best Science Fiction Books of 1950 in which the panel was composed of L. Sprague de Camp, Jim Williams of Prime Press, the fabulous Bob Tucker, and others—moderated by well-known fan Milt Rothman.

Then there was a group discussion where everyone got up and said something; the grand finale was supplied by the auction of many interesting items: original illos, manuscripts, etc., with auctioneer Sam Moskowitz whose talents didn't reach efficiency level since his voice is wasted on less than a thousand people! But I'm sure the people outside and several blocks away appreciated him!

This year the convention committee is headed by Ozzie Train who promises an outstanding program. Of special interest will be de Camp's part of the program entitled: LOST CITIES OF BRAZIL. If you care for more information, you can write me or Sol Levin, secretary of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society (PSFS) at 1614 Locust Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

And now, speaking for myself, can anyone sell me the following books by Edgar Rice Burroughs? JUNGLE GIRL, TANAR OF PELLUCIDAR, BACK TO THE STONE AGE, and THE LAD AND THE LION. Also, almost any ERB book in a first edition.

DAVE HAMMOND

Mullen stories have appeared in PLANET in Spring '49, Summer '49, and Summer '50. . . ED.

MORE BRAD—BRAWL

24 Kensington Ave.,
Jersey City 4, N. J.

Calling Mal Reiss!

Are you receiving? Good, good—got my set rigged on a tight frequency, here, with a booster hooked in from the ship's converter leads. But there's a thirty-ton cargo of blfsk in the hold and, man, what that does to the magnetics!

Needed a tight beam to blast through the signal

jam to you. Got the old Jersey City drifting off the Magellanics, out here, twenty-four secs out from Kensington—anybody want to discuss secs?—and the noise is kinda rough! Looks like the kids are on another star migration. Ever notice how, every so often, a new crop seems to get that stardust in their eyes? In the Septish, I see you taped Lanoue's demise on an alien world, Mitchell monster lab, and McNamara's witchcraft.

In the Novish, there was Oddo's and Semenovich's spaceflights and the obituary of Dennis Strong. The same old stuff—they're breezing around in spacecraft, barging into half-a-thousand Off Limits systems, scaring the pants off themselves and the poor, innocent BEMs. No doubt the Patrol shall hear of it. But the kids are loose, and for months, now, their cluttered signals have jammed the Vizi till us old spacebonds couldn't get a beam in edgewise! But gad, remember when we first—

Well, I'll be doubly triple-blasted. Ever try to stabilize thirty tons of blfsk in a ten-ton spacer and light a cigarette at the same time?

Notice you taped the Nolan-to-Corby-to-Stone. Real deep stuff, this Bradburyana. Judging from her critique, Mary Corby seems like an intelligent, serious young female. Intelligence is fine, but why are so many of today's fans so serious? Her general premise would seem correct: though Bradbury has a terrific literary style, and his stories have deserved most of the acclaim they've received—but he does stick to the same story-theme, and when you think how much more he might do if he could only switch that terrific style to other themes—brother!

On the surface, there wouldn't seem to be any reason for Brad to keep using that same theme. He doesn't need it as any trademark of his writing—his style, itself, is certainly trademark enough. So it isn't surprising that readers such as Corby would suppose that Brad has some morbid fascination for the death motif in that theme.

But 'tain't necessarily so. That one theme ties in closely with Brad's style, and it just might be that if he tried to switch to other themes, his style wouldn't come through! It might even be that Brad's as sick of that one theme as Doyle was of Sherlock Holmes, but like Doyle he just can't turn loose of it! The only person who can answer this is Brad, himself.

On the other hand, there are very versatile writers. Will Jenkins, for example, who has shown good versatility in switching both themes and styles. But Jenkins has never developed a unique style such as Bradbury's. Both have top writing ability but in two separate ways, each with its limitations.

Then, of course, you have readers like Art Stone who not only suppose Brad has a morbid fascination for that death motif, but who even approve of it. But when he beamed "I can't see where we've become more intelligent, less hateful, or less susceptible to . . . mob action since the Hebrews were driven from Egypt or the crucifixion of Christ" he left the door wide open. Hereafter, Art, old boy, speak for yourself!

Still, I suppose we should go easy on the poor chap. Seems he hasn't been around as long as we have, nor studied history well enough to have absorbed more than two or three fool historians' versions of it. Otherwise, he'd have known that four centuries ago we'd have sought him out to kill him for such mouthings. Thanks to the changed attitudes of the past four hundred years, though, we're content merely to recommend Wells' OUTLINE OF HISTORY to him.

JOE GIBSON

How Old is Santa Claus?

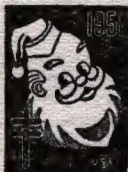


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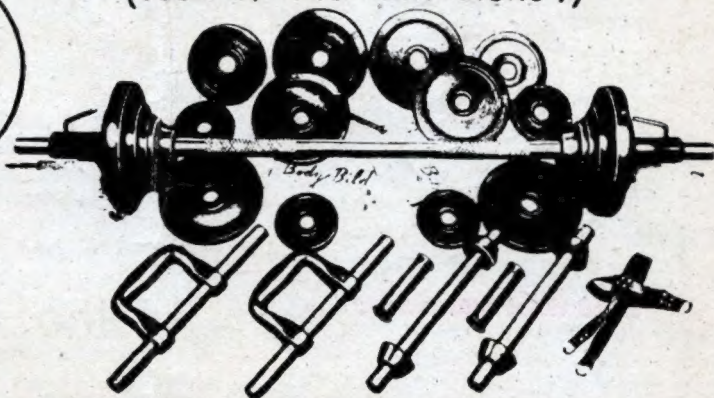
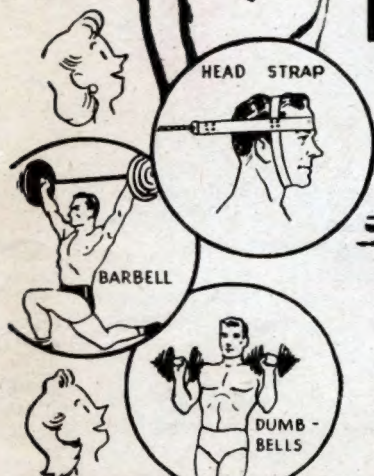


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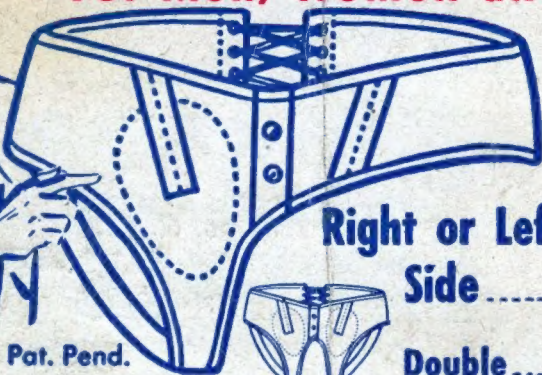
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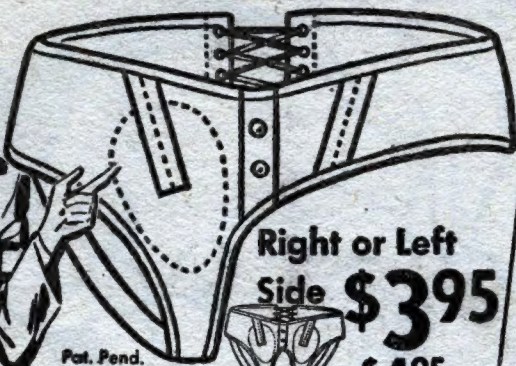
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Kansas City 6, Mo.

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Right Side ☐ \$3.95
Left Side ☐ \$3.95
Double ☐ \$4.95

Measure around lowest part
of my abdomen in
_____ INCHES.

We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s
(Note: Be Sure to give Size and Side when ordering.)

Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for \$_____ ☐ Send C. O. D.

Name _____

Address _____

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